

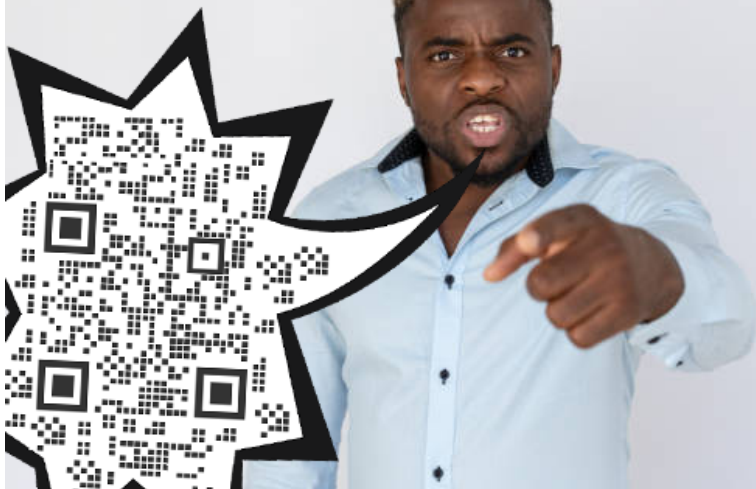
THE YOUNG ANCIENTS: BOOK IV

AMBASSADOR



P.S. POWER

SHOUT **IT**
SHARE



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P. S. Power

Ambassador

Chapter one

“Uh...”

OK, not the most brilliant statement of all time, but he was being detained? For what? Tor really wanted to know that before he just went peaceably. After all, it could be a trick. The King hadn't mentioned it to him after all. Worse, Captain Curtis, the city guardsmen in charge, wouldn't tell him. No, he just stood, backed by a hundred red and white uniformed men in funny round hats with a flat top and bill on the front to shade the eye.

A hundred armed men.

Well, it was Smythe who asked, so this probably wasn't aimed at him personally. It rankled, but what could they do? They all lined up and went along. Captain Curtis demanded everyone give up their weapons and shields as well as any other magical devices they were holding. That made Tor wary again.

Why would they want them unarmed? They were just witnesses to an attack, not the assassins. They'd caught those and delivered them already. It didn't make sense.

Tor tried to treat it as a joke, but he felt really worried, like the whole thing was horribly wrong. Then, he'd always been nervous around guards. They didn't have those in his home village at all.

“Are you going to steal them? If you do I'll be upset, and possibly badmouth you by name in the streets, Captain Curtis.” Tor was joking, mainly, but he didn't want to be robbed like he had been before, and have to start all over yet again. It had only been a month since the last time. It was really about too much. The man didn't say anything to him, just fingered his weapon and glared, menacingly. He was good at it, like it was part of his job or something. The man looked about thirty and over six-four, now that Tor saw him on the ground. His moustache was brown, and kind of thin, trimmed that way.

Seriously though? They were being taken prisoner? After everything this was how they were treated? Like criminals? In public too, just to humiliate them? Tor couldn't grasp it at all. Was it possibly...

Nope, nothing came. It just didn't make sense. Even if the world had gone insane it didn't.

Smythe wondered out loud if it was to check for spies in their midst's. Austran ones, Tor guessed. Well, they did have several assassins with them, but they weren't a real threat now, were they? The red and white clad men started to get more and more uneasy while he stood thinking. No one else had moved either. Finally he started taking his amulets off, but readied a new shield just in case. It

wouldn't help the others, but if this was really bad, an attack or something, he could do more prepared than not. A man with a box came around to collect things, poking and patting at clothing, to make sure nothing was being hidden. They took all of his things too, his trunks of amulets and gold. It felt sad to watch them leave like that, trailing behind a guard private, little puffs of dust behind his black booted feet.

They didn't go anywhere; they just had to stand under the hot sun. Tor wore only a pair of shorts, since they'd taken his magical clothing. It was humiliating, but he didn't let it gnaw at him, at least he'd had this clothing left in his trunk and grabbed it before they took everything away. They weren't to talk, or sit. Just stand, sweating and baking under an unforgiving orb in the sky. Tor used the time to build field after field into the loose undergarments. They wouldn't last long, he felt, more than knew. The material was too soft to hold a field more than six months or so, at a guess, especially making them while standing and trying to keep his eyes open. Finally he let them close. No one noticed for a long time. That lasted for a while, which he used to build a nice solid new weapon, until one of the guards came and pushed him, knocking him forward.

The others laughed, because he didn't catch himself properly, being too deep. He just didn't have a reaction time at all in states like that. Not at all really. On the good side Tor didn't really feel the impact, about the only saving grace in the situation at all. He heard the pop though. His nose bleeding freely for a while after that, clearly broken, as he tried to keep his eyes open. The guards all pointed and laughed at him openly, as if watching Torrance Baker bleed was a great game.

Then the men made a point of mocking him every few minutes for a while, calling him names. Mainly focusing on the fact that he was short, common looking, and probably had a small manhood based on his physical size. Though they used more colorful language for that part of him. It got bad enough after a while that even Smythe was starting to look a little angry about it. Given their history together, Tor decided to take that as a sign that what was happening might just be out of line.

A little bit at least.

They stood till near dark. The Larval were put under a tent, but the rest of them weren't allowed even water. As night fell they were finally escorted around the city by a full company of one hundred guards in their silly uniforms.

They all had shields. All ones he'd made. Old ones from over a year before he noted, checking them all closely, feeling the fields call to him. Everything they had of a magical nature was at least based on

designs he'd created. Even the weapons.

Gods and puppies, had his work really sucked that much back then? That made him wince, if it was that bad then, how bad was it still? Gah, so much to learn. The fields weren't fading at all, but they had... holes, weaknesses, and things that he'd fixed over time, in later versions. For instance, if a person were focused enough, practiced enough, they could turn them all off at a distance. Say, a hundred feet? It wasn't a sure thing, but he thought that might be the case.

Especially true if the person doing it had designed them in the first place.

The twin streams of dried blood had flowed down his sparsely haired chest, pooling at the top of the cotton shorts, matting the hair to him so that when he shifted, even a little, it ripped up from the roots. Sure, it wasn't the worst pain he'd felt in the last day, not even close, but it was a further indignity. Not exactly a hero's welcome, was it?

If he didn't have a good explanation soon, he was going to have to do something. Lack of water was taking its toll, as the men and women with him hadn't had any for a day already by then and the sun had baked the rest away. His mouth was parched and bitter, so much that it tasted like sand inside his mouth. Everyone else had shoes at least, his feet were sore, tender, but not bleeding when they got around the outer wall, the far side, away from the river. He couldn't even smell water in the air. His shoulders were burned red as well as his back, causing a less than friendly guard he'd never met to slap him there several times. Hard.

"Stupid little peasant should have worn a shirt!" The man quipped as he struck again several times. He didn't react to the pain, so it became a game to the bored men, coming up behind him and slapping while they walked past. Each coming in with an insult, as if the guards were trying to outdo each other in creativity with each curse. The blows got harder and harder too, each one finally rocking him forward as he walked, the blows making enough sound that the people around him jumped from it. Tor didn't let himself do that, sinking deeper within between each.

No one else got such treatment. The girls had even been given water. Smythe too, but not Count Ward. He looked about ready to kill someone, even though no one had even spoken harshly to him. Too big, and a sitting Count, if one out of favor. No, most of the abuse got heaped on Tor, being the smallest and youngest looking one there.

Low level maybe, compared to true torture, but enough to tick him off. The slaps had turned into closed fist blows before they got all the way around the wall. All to his upper back at first, but a few aimed at the back of his head, the game being who could knock him

down apparently. It seemed, from what the guards called out there was a wager on.

Houses were set up for them, or perhaps just to tease them. All magical “Tor-houses”. The older kind. Well, they were sturdy enough and if you barricaded the doors well, they'd be hard to get out of. If, you know, you hadn't built them yourself. Or if you didn't know how a basic sigil worked. So in other words, if you were a moron.

Really, you'd think that they would have caught on that trying to keep Tor a prisoner in a “Tor-house” might be a poor idea, but no one seemed to notice that. The guardsmen didn't seem to be noticing much of anything though.

Finally a young guard came around with a dipper full of water and a bucket. Everyone wanted more, but was given only one dipper per person. Almost as if to tease them with it. Everyone was so far beyond parched the situation was nearly unbearable.

When it came to Tor he tested it with his mind first. That was automatic now, if it went into his body, it got tested somehow. He'd learned that one the hard way.

“Poison!” The sound rasped from his throat, dark and gravely, a bit dry for real volume. It was too late for everyone else, unless he could get to the healing amulets, which were nowhere to be seen, or...

A fist cracked against his jaw. Then he was hit again as he reeled. Tor blocked the third, the thirty-something bully in front of him barely noticing, his mustache curled back in a sneer. It was the same man that had started the whole “beating up Tor” game earlier.

Heh.

Time to fight then, if they were going to kill him anyway... Kill them. That seemed fair, didn't it?

As planned Tor turned off all their shields as he reeled and fell to the ground from a blow that came in from a younger guard that jumped in from behind. Then tapping his waistband, a comic gesture he was certain, Tor brought up his own gear. It wasn't perfect and the effects weren't even or pretty, but it would serve. Pointing his right hand at the arrayed guards they fell like stick-men in a yard war. With his left, a slight nimbus of energy around it, glowing red, he sent out a blast of vertigo. Where it touched, men fell, weapons dangling loose in their hands. After a minute they started to vomit, and couldn't stop. After two they went to the ground and stayed there, heaving hard.

Hey, Tor thought, it worked. It was just something he'd thought up on the fly, a mental weapon, and these hadn't been the best working conditions, so in all he was pretty proud of it.

No one on his side had moved to help, which was wise, since they'd get sick too. But when he glanced over they were all laying down already, the poison taking them. Crap. Hurrying he found which

red and white clad person on the ground was Curtis and moved the field carefully to let him catch his breath, then crossing his right hand under his left he pinned the man to the ground with the force lance. Or at least a kind of field that was like it. He'd tried for strong, but the man really looked uncomfortable, almost as if the life were being crushed from him.

Too freaking bad, stupid guard Captain should have resisted picking a fight with a Builder, shouldn't he? Tor started asking questions without preamble. If the guy couldn't get it fast enough he'd try someone else.

"What did you give them? What's the poison?"

"What?" The guard Captain gasped, and waved his hands weakly, as if it would help him breathe. "Not poison, sleep draft, just to keep prisoners from getting restless at night. They'll just sleep for about six hours, that's all." He gasped and wasn't too loud, but Tor could make out what he said.

He even felt like he was being honest, so all these people weren't going to die. Good. Tor went on without waiting.

"Who told you to abuse us? Why? What's the purpose behind this?" Tor heard words that came from the man, but they were all lies, talk of standard procedure and a shortage of men. It got the other man pinned to the ground. Harder. That was one of the neat features of his new weapon. He could increase or decrease the force applied.

With a thought. He increased the organization until Captain Curtis groaned pitifully.

"Give me truth. Who and why. Now."

Now was a bit optimistic, it took a bit, but the order had come down the chain of command, it was said from the King. It said nothing about abuse or harsh treatment, not specifically for him at least, Tor guessed trying to read the man closely, but it had mentioned that they were suspects and witnesses regarding an attack of Austran Larval assassins they had with them and should be treated with caution. And not gently. Especially the enemy Count. Ward. The Captain didn't know why everything was taking so long, but suspected some kind of meeting. Nobles loved meetings he said.

That was true. They could take a good ten minute chat about what to do next and milk it for days if you gave them a chance.

"OK, and the harassment?"

"They'd heard about the Austrans and the men are no lovers of that kind or those that would help them. It wasn't personal; they were just letting off some steam."

The man believed it well enough, but Tor wasn't about to let him up. Standing back he did remove the force lance field thing for a minute... and stomped the man in the face. It didn't bleed until he'd

done it four more times, heel firmly to the center of it, a satisfying crackle finally coming from under Tor's foot. Then he stomped his groin for good measure, causing the Captain to curl into a ball, trying to protect himself.

"Don't worry, I heard you led a troop of abusive assholes, so, you know, I'm just letting off a little steam about that. You understand and endorse this kind of thing though, right? No misunderstanding here? You think it's OK to abuse the people in your care who are the witnesses to a crime? The people that stopped the attack? So you won't mind this, no hard feelings, right?" No answer came for some reason. Tor kicked him in the groin again.

He couldn't just leave them, being too dangerous. For a second he wondered if cutting of their arms and legs would be in order, but decided that was a bit of an over-reaction. Instead he ordered them to strip and take off their clothing and amulets. They didn't do it, feeling too ill to move, that or too important for such treatment. Probably that second one. They looked snooty at least.

Tor hit them with the other field too, adding to their distress. A few tried to hold out and not do as he said, so he moved over to them carefully, repeated the orders and stomped their noses until they bleed too. His nose hurt in shared pain, but it served them right. His own shoulders hurt so much they burned, deep into the flesh from the blows, like the skin, already sun burnt and crisp, had torn in places, he could barely move his arms already.

It took a while to manage it all, but he finally locked them in the houses intended for prisoners, the little magic ones, and turned the heat up on high, with no water connected inside. Then he made the doors turn into solid walls. It took an hour, but it worked. These were his houses after all. What kind of moron tries to put a builder in a prison of their own making?

All the people he'd come with slept on the ground, except the larval assassins, who'd been given much gentler care, and taken away by wagon after the rest were marched around the Capital wall. Poking around he found his things and dressed again, putting his amulets on and healing himself, Which merely stung and ached more intensely for a moment, compared to the searing and severe pain of the last healing.

Then he went around and did the other people to see if it would clear the drugs from their systems. It worked, people got up after about twenty seconds, as if they'd just been napping. Thank god. He'd really felt all alone there for a while, even with people right there next to him. The first thing everyone did was get amulets back on, and agree to fight rather than surrender them again. Even the military counselor was with them on that, which told Tor a whole lot about the

situation.

Smythe was normally a “follow the rules” kind of guy. For him to be that angry was... telling. The second was to use the communications device and get in touch with the King. Smythe wanted to speak first. Being the oldest and his boss, Tor agreed. Tor screaming at Richard from the start wouldn't help anything at all, would it? It probably wouldn't even make him feel better, Tor knew. Acting the bully always made him feel worse about himself in the end. No matter how good the reason seemed at the time. Honestly, though he didn't let it show, he already felt bad about having hurt the guards like he had. They'd been out of line and kind of evil to him, but most of them were probably all right people most of the time. It made it really hard though, being still angry like he was. What could he do about it? Yell and complain? Like that would help?

He let the military commander do it instead. Smythe even did a good job. Oh, he was polite, in a cold and wintry way. He never called names or suggested that the King himself order this for some reason, but he did tell him all about what happened, including how Tor had been treated and how he'd subdued the guards, unarmed and wearing only a pair of cotton undergarments. Then he suggested that the city guard had started a bit of a rebellion and if the King wasn't trying to do it on purpose, he'd better get out and explain that to them in person. Then he turned and bowed slightly to Tor.

“Anything to add?”

He had a bit, about his personal humiliation at the hands of the guards, the harassment and finally how they were currently locked in magical houses meant to imprison them, with the amulets put on the doors and the doors made into part of the wall. That and the fact that Tor had left the heat in each turned up on high.

“But how are we supposed to get them open?” The King's voice asked as if it was just a novel way of storing the amulets or something. He went quiet for a long while when Tor didn't say anything, a deafening silence. Finally it broke, sounding... frustrated.

“Oh.” The single word sounded pissy really, like Tor was in the wrong again somehow.

It got a soft snort of derision from the short builder into the communications device.

“Don't worry, it's no worse than what they did to us, they can even sit or lay down if they want for comfort. I'm sure they'll be fine if we let them out in ten hours or so. A day or two tops... What is it with you people? What have you been doing while we've been kept prisoner and trust me if you say, “eating a multi-course meal and then chatting about patriotism” I'm coming over there and... Well, I don't know what I'll do, but I'll ask around for ideas and trust me these

people are ticked enough to come up with some good ones!" There. That would show him.

Vague threats that would probably involve bending all the silver up or something if anything happened at all. Well, it was the best he could think up, as poor as it was. Maybe call the Council of Counts names?

"No... we did get side tracked, but not on anything that trivial. You were supposed to be given good accommodations and left in comfort to await debriefing. I..." The voice trailed as voices laughed in the background.

One of them said, quite clearly enough for everyone to hear, even on far side of the device, "Sounds like Tor was already de-briefed!" A few chuckles followed.

Ah. A short blast of irritation ran through him then. Then a stronger one. He really didn't feel like being mocked at the moment. He'd had enough of that. Hour's worth. While being beaten.

It was enough.

"Seriously? After all this, you want to mock me and laugh at what I've had to put up with? What we all had to endure?" The voice that came out of his own mouth sounded different. Low. Dangerous. The tittering on the other end of the device stopped dead.

"Ah, I didn't know you could hear me this far from the device...." The voice said, an older male it sounded like. Old enough to know better then.

Tor let his voice go light and pleasant as Trice and Sara moved in on him. He shook with rage, but didn't let it be heard in his voice.

"That's alright... say, what's your name?"

"Um, Count Holstead."

"Holstead, Holstead... someone help me out here, that's up in the cold section of Noram, on the west side? I'm so shaky about things like that geography...." Tor waited until Smythe helpfully said it was. Actually he gave very precise sounding direction, just in case Tor wanted to visit.

"Oh? Good. Well, fine then, I'll remember that. If someone could get the names of the others that were laughing too?" It wasn't a threat, not really, after all, as far as he knew Holstead had never even done business with him at all. What was he going to do anyway? Refuse to sell them anything? Over a bad joke? He felt like it, sure, but that would just be punishing a bunch of innocent people for the words of one. Hardly fair.

No one spoke for a long while after that. Finally the King said that he'd be there in ten minutes. It took more like a half hour, because royals were slow sometimes. They had to arrange guards and who sat where, that kind of thing. In the transport with the King was a

slightly unusual group. Maria Ward, Rolph and Ursala. There were some other people too, probably Counts, including Holly Printer and somehow, wedged into the back, Count Ford.

If the others were big, Ford was ridiculous about it. To make matters worse he wasn't even thin like a lot of royals, but held vast muscle that rippled as he moved. He was serious faced and had probably come to call Tor on his insolence, which he deserved no doubt, but couldn't seem to care about at the moment. They had Royal Guards with them, which made everyone stiffen, but they didn't attack, not yet at any rate.

He spoke clearly, but in a low tone.

"Hold fast. The Royal Guard are a tough group, but they can't match our armor or weapons right now. If it comes to a fight right now, they lose." It was just the truth. If this were a fist fight, any two of them could probably take out most of the people with them, sure.

But it wasn't and none of the Royal Guard had high quality shields or weapons at all. Sensible, since those would probably be ones he'd made himself. He did see a couple of the ones that had come down to Ward for the investigation though. They'd obviously got the others out during the attack, with Sorlee. Good idea. They probably couldn't have taken the Larval anyway and running made sense if you couldn't win any other way. So they let Tor fight and buy them time, and did the part they could that would make a difference.

Brilliant really.

Tor felt like he could barely stand, then it got worse, so he sat on the ground which was better, because when he fell over into the powdery dust it didn't hurt. Not that it would have with the shield on. After a while he noticed it, a buzzing kind of thing. Different pitches started to come through and finally with a lot of effort, he pried his eyes open to see what was going on.

People he didn't know were over him, speaking in some foreign tongue. He was so thirsty that he couldn't stand it, so he tried to get up and run away, in case they were bad people. The big people could be, his ma had told him that. If he saw any he was supposed to run home.

He stumbled as someone cheated and tilted the earth under him so he couldn't move right. That didn't make sense did it? No one tackled him, but they followed him as he ran. No matter how fast he went, they just walked along with him, saying something. They looked funny, too huge. Was he a child again? But these weren't his parents or friends from the village. He had a cutter, right, or no, it was a... pushing thing in his underpants. That made him laugh. He said underpants in his head. That was dirty.

So thirsty. Where was the water? He saw some and went to take a

drink, but couldn't. Someone told him why, a giant girl, the shield had to go off? Right... He hit his chest and started drinking from the bucket, just sticking his head in. It made him sick, which hurt when he threw up, but he drank more water after that anyway. Some man came and told him something, and he said maybe, even though he didn't understand, not wanting to be rude, and drank more water, but then he fell asleep and couldn't get up.

A bit later Tor woke and felt groggy but not so much he couldn't stay awake. He needed more water. They'd nearly killed him with the lack, especially after the massive healing the day before taking up all that water to fix things. He looked around, but couldn't remember where the water was. Well, at home. But he didn't have a home now, did he? Several large men came over when he got up.

"Better Tor? People are wondering about the guards..." It was Rolph. His friend.

It was so hard to think though. Rolph was here in Two Bends and he was a little kid still? It was a dream wasn't it? He had a magic thing that let him fly in his dreams, so he hit the stone on the back of his left hand and went up, high in the air. Other people started flying after him. It was funny, because he was standing up and not even flapping his arms. He tried it and felt sick, because his stomach tossed and turned. There was a big river so he landed there, trying to get water. But a woman came, she had golden hair and looked pretty, but was mean and said he couldn't have any water, because it was too dirty to drink and that no one wanted him too. He didn't like her. Hitting his other hand he rose a tiny way into the air, which was easier to do and floated around. Other people did it too, some big men in purple and black clothes tried to hurt him again, grabbing at him, so he ran away.

"Run away!" He called out loudly, easily going faster than the slow big people. They didn't know it, but his magic was better than theirs. He'd made it that way before and didn't tell in case... In case this happened. In case big people tried to hurt him. Again.

He was smart. Except he fell down somehow, tripped by the ground on a low hill when he ran into a large rock, and hit hard. Things snapped and crackled again. It hurt. He slept in a darkness greater than he could remember then.

When he came to he felt better. Normal really, Ursala was kneeling beside him and giving him water, fresh water from somewhere, not a bucket. Tor was still on the ground, lying in the dirt kind of made that apparent, so no one had bothered to move him inside. He drank slowly and carefully, but he had to keep doing it, over and over again. Too much had been removed. When he couldn't take any more for the time being he sat up.

"Hey." Tor said weakly, looking around from a lower place than normal. He wasn't a child, just lying down.

"I... think the healing takes a lot of water and other resources and I was hurt pretty badly before, and didn't have anything for over a day, then with the sun and heat, the beatings. Not a good thing, you know? I just ran out of everything all at once." It seemed no one was listening, but Rolph nodded and walked over to him.

"Makes sense. Sorry about all this. Um, what about the hundred men you have locked up? People are still worried there."

Tor shrugged.

"It's only a magic shield made opaque, since I'm not important enough to treat as a real person, how about they figure it out for themselves? That seems just, doesn't it? If my job, my very being, is so useless and unimportant I can be humiliated and nearly killed, mistreated and abused, I'm sure they won't have any problem fixing things for themselves from now on. All they have to do it remind the door where it was. Kind of surprised no one has gotten out yet. I didn't make it insanely hard or anything, it's really simple. Little kids would be out already. Maybe they're mentally handicapped? Only a person like that would be out already too, most likely. Is there more water?"

There was and it was cool. Bless Ursala, she'd brought one of his old mugs with cooling and heating devices built in. He had to drink four more before he felt able to stand. It was dark, but time wise that was all he had. Dark something O'clock.

They probably had until morning to figure it out before the guards would die. Maybe longer, they wouldn't get that hot. The houses weren't designed to work like ovens. They got warm, but it wasn't death temperature. Rolph didn't like that answer, so he went to tell his dad, who told Smythe. That would probably get Smythe to try and kill him. So Tor tried to hit his shield.

Nothing happened. counting what was around his neck he realized it had been taken. So had his weapon. Well, he'd been acting crazy. He didn't remember it all, but enough to guess it involved a lot of falling down and acting stupid. Great, more things to be embarrassed about.

Tor got up and walked back to his trunk, wondering for the first time in his life if magic was just more trouble than it was worth? Every time he made something to help people, or even try to protect himself, it seemed to backfire on him eventually. Plus, everyone seemed to pretend to be his friend or at least that he was OK, until something like this happens and then they suddenly acted like it was it's fine to treat him like garbage. No one even bothered to pay attention to what he was really doing most of the time, as long as it served them somehow.

Like right now.

"You've all, the nobles at least, grown up using magic. You can't figure out how to simply turn a device off?" Tor stared, a bit baffled. Wasn't it just obvious? "Really? Come on people! It's just a magic device... I didn't change it into something else for goodness sake. It's a house not a prison."

The King looked upset, probably with him, but if so, screw him. Holly was looking down at the ground, kicking at it. The other Counts all looked either angry or like they'd rather have been sleeping, which sounded like a good idea at the moment. A really good one in fact.

Opening up the first trunk he came to, a real one, not a field made to look real, Tor rearmed and shielded. It wasn't as good of a weapon, but he had the ones built into his shorts, as funny as that was. Just, from now on he wasn't letting anyone take him prisoner and if they tried he was fighting. To the death if it came to that. He looked at the King and didn't break eye contact.

"I mean it too. If you want me to do something, ask and I'll do it. Stand down and go live in the desert alone? Fine. Take a cutter to my neck and behead myself. Sure. But if anyone, King, Count or city guard tries to take me prisoner, I'll fight as hard as I can, until I can't any more. Because really, this stuff is getting old. I get treated like this and then you people come along and act like I'm the bad guy? Smythe tries to kill me over and again, I get snubbed and pushed around by Royal Guards almost as if it were a game to them and now the city guard personally turns me into their enemy? Fine..."

Tor stomped over to one of the Counts he didn't recognize and stopped in front of him, hands on hips. He was an older man, not as big as some, about six-six. He had on a black military style uniform, but no insignia at all. Most of the Counts had taken to wearing them, a kind of protective coloring, to make them less of a target than brightly colored flashy clothing would. The man held his ground but didn't look as confident as Counts normally did, as if he expected Tor to assault him or something. So did everyone else, but not even the Royal Guard tried to intervene.

"You, who are you?" Tor asked in a tone probably better left unused with royalty in general. It was stupid of him, but he just didn't care right now.

"Um, Count Holstead..."

Oh. "The one that thinks humiliating me is a joke? A good time fun fest for all? Well, even ticked off I can tell it probably is funny, if you weren't the one embarrassed in public all day long like that, beaten and abused. So tell you what, let's just leave it all up to Holstead here..." Tor spun to take in everyone else.

The King looked stony, but he often did, it was his go to facial

expression in any given emergency. Rolph buried his head in his hands and groaned.

“No... Tor. Let's go and get you cooled down, get some food and water, then sleep and do this in the morning? If you want then we can take turns beating the guards, or even Holstead here. I mean, I know that you felt humiliated and shamed by being left mainly naked all day, but no one else cared. Not the guards, not the people with you and not the passersby. Really, they probably thought you were being given special privileges and not being made to bake in clothes like the others were... We don't care if people are nude here. Hey, want me to strip and run around the city? No one would think it anything more than youthful exuberance and I might get a date out of it.” He tried to look calm, which didn't work too well. Right, because he saw what Tor was about to do.

Rolph was smart like that.

“Tell me, Count Holstead, what would you do if this... No, wait, not what happened to me, no one cares about that... What would you do if what happened to Count Ward, or Counselor Smythe happened to you instead? How would you respond?”

The King saw the trap and sucked in a breath of air. Ursala got it too. After all, what most of the Counts would do involved making war on someone, possibly leading the other Counts to attack the King's forces. And Smythe was still the military leader of the kingdom. If he wanted, he could bring down the whole thing by himself, most likely. The city guard had almost certainly started a war that day already.

Rolph walked to Tor slowly, but didn't try to touch him or anything stupid like that.

Holstead, for all that he had a poor sense of timing and a loud voice, didn't hesitate though. He walked to the other men and sank to his knees in front of them, laying his head on the ground.

“It was a mistake. I can only ask forgiveness for my part in it. Please, if you must blame someone for this, blame me and not those I serve...” He didn't rise and the two men didn't move to release him.

Soon the others moved over, with Ursala and Holly being the last. They moved grudgingly, but that was kind of natural. After all, Holly still probably blamed Ward for killing her husband even though he hadn't. She'd taken a vow to destroy him and now had to break it, that or destroy an innocent man that had been used by their enemies, and kill a lot of his people, all of whom were probably at least as innocent of the crime. It was a quandary no doubt. They did it though. Bent the knee, if not as deeply as the rest. The one thing didn't have to do with the other directly and war was always a losing game, for all they liked to threaten it so freely here.

Rolph didn't go to a knee, but did bow and finally the King did

too. It was all very polite and touching. Smythe demanded an investigation into the matter, which was allowed, the King making it an actual order without pause. Ward just nodded stiffly and waved a hand at everyone else that had been out there as well. That...

That made the Counts and countesses wary and recalcitrant suddenly. Tor blinked for a moment, taking in the sea of angry faces.

Right. Never bow to a stable boy.

Rolph did it for them, regally, majestically even, as if he suddenly wore a crown on his head and full raiment's, walking to each and bowing in turn, shaking hands when one was offered him and smoothing things over. Promising it hadn't been on purpose and apologizing as if that would make any real difference to the world. After a minute Ursala started doing the same thing. Well, if she was going to be Queen some day, she might as well start following her future King's lead now. Even if she wasn't, it made her look good.

The other royals didn't move, which Tor kind of thought was cowardly of them. The heir to the freaking throne of all Noram was bowing and humbling himself for them, but they were too good to step forward themselves and even mumble a few words to people that had been so wronged?

Sure, most of these guys brought people drinks or food, one or two may even be real stable boys, and though he wasn't sure, some of the few women might even have been dancing girls from the party, still wearing their white dresses, dirt stained and grubby from their ordeals. They might even be whores.

They'd also been taken from an attack, injured, still frightened and away from their home without notice, uncertain as to the future, and these royals wouldn't even go and give them a slap on the back? Say, "sorry about the mix up there, have some coins to tide you over..." or anything? They didn't even have to act like they meant it for most of these people. God. Gods. He would have added in the universe, but the universe didn't care.

Tor did though.

Tor got another drink of water from a cask of it, and then went to the trunk containing all his gold. Well he had enough to share anyway. No hardship for him. He went to the man who was farthest away in line, young and dirty looking, standing uneasily and scared suddenly, which made no sense, since the guy was his buddy now, right? They'd been through it together, and if his new friend needed anything he'd get it.

Tor popped the top of the case. The man, no older than he was, goggled a bit. Tor took out ten gold coins under the magic lights that had been set around and handed them to the man.

"To cover your expenses while you're here." He said loudly

enough for everyone to hear. The King was... stony again. A bit of a mental chill came from his position, not quite hidden well enough to miss being noticed.

Well, if he wanted to have a problem with Tor giving money away he could go right ahead and fuck himself up the ass with it. As King he was responsible for everything that had happened that day anyway. That's what King meant. If it made him angry to see poor people getting money, then screw him. Royally. They'd earned it. He went down the whole line and handed an equal sum to Ward, who didn't have any gold on him since they'd left in kind of a hurry and then turned to the line of men and women.

"Right. We all have to give statements and probably shouldn't be running off before we prove we weren't in on the attack. But after that, everyone is invited to stay at my house until things are settled properly. No one will be left at loose ends. Don't worry, if there's no room, I'll make it. I trust that's sufficient?" Tor looked at the King who nodded as if it was his plan all along. Maybe it was? But if this had been an elaborate trick to get him to pay for everything, well, they could have just asked.

Without waiting for anyone else to plan anything Tor turned on his truth device, the same one he'd used the day before, he thought, and explained how it worked to everyone, Smythe and Ward backing him up on how effective they were. Then he began.

"I did not plan the Austran attack, I'm not working with the Larval assassins and, to the best of my knowledge, nothing I've ever done should have invited such an attack, even though it was, for some reason, clearly aimed at me this time, or at least meant to look that way. I'm not an Austran agent, spy, asset or supporter. And... even though disgruntled right now, I'm loyal to the King and kingdom, which does not preclude a shouting match later, Rich." He glared up at the King, who just nodded as if it were expected.

Then he went over the whole story of the last week, covering everything he could remember, including his dates with Nita, until he got to being taken into custody. There were things in that story he was proud of, and still others he didn't want everyone here to know. How scared he was that everyone was going to die and how he got sick when he saw what had happened with the Larval for instance. He said that out loud, but then turned, took off the activated amulet and handed it to Smythe.

The man may be an over reactive murdering jerk at times, but he got the point and made his own statement clearly and concisely. The glow matching his robes perfectly. Rolph noticed and indicated it with his head and a tiny half smile at Tor who just nodded somberly. At least someone appreciated his work.

Then Smythe questioned the Count and everyone else in turn by rank, with the idea being that someone of high rank was more likely to be responsible for a Major plot and assassination attempt than the lowest person in the line. Since he'd already gone, that part had been taken care of at least. Oddly enough everyone was cleared fairly easily. Some of the men did lie, but it was about stupid stuff, like the fellow that hadn't wanted to admit he was in the restroom doing his business there when the attack started and hid in fear instead of fighting or even running. He looked ashamed but Tor wondered how well he'd have done if the whole thing had started when he was that vulnerable? Probably no better. Freezing seemed reasonable given those conditions, didn't it?

A few others tried to make themselves seem braver than they were, not mentioning how frightened they'd been while it had happened, of course, and that didn't work with the field they wore. Trice and Sara both tried to hedge, but oddly that was only about what Tor looked like after the fight, which was... bad. So gruesome they didn't want to say the words. Smythe got it out of them, nodding when they explained. He'd seen it too, but hadn't gone into the details when it had been his turn. To him that wasn't overly important. Oddly it was more that he simply expected Tor to just do something like he had, and get back up without pause, nearly dead or not. To the girls it was much worse for some reason, so they had to say the words, because otherwise it would look like they lied.

Ursala, and for some reason Maria, kept gasping when they heard everything, like Tor figuring that the assassins would just kill him, and that his fighting had only been meant to buy people time to escape. That he'd lived at all had been dumb luck and trickery on his part, as well as the fact that Trice, Sara, Ward and Smythe had stayed, prepared to die trying to slow the Larvals after they killed Tor so the others would have a chance. That's what saved him, because Trice had run up and started healing him almost instantly after the last Larval went down.

"I wanted to help before..." She said, her right arm hugging her middle. "We all did... but it was a duel. Tor had called them out, and they agreed to terms, so we couldn't intercede without shaming him." Her voice shook a bit when she said it.

Almost maniacally he had to laugh at that, there was just too much not to.

"Oh!" He gasped, seeing her face fall a bit, looking baffled. "In the future, if it happens again, shame away! I personally don't feel any real need to play fairly with assassins." Everyone looked at him, worried at first, then Richard started to chuckle.

"Noted." Was all he said though.

When everyone was cleared Tor handed the amulet to the King, already turned on and asked if he'd ordered the events of the day, and if so, in what detail. Everyone else looked horribly uneasy, except Richard who simply nodded and started to speak loudly enough for everyone to hear easily. What he said didn't sound anything like what happened. Not at all.

"I ordered you all detained for questioning and holding for those that needed it. The assassins. The houses were to be set up for your collective comfort, since they have restroom facilities and would be a place to lie down if anyone needed to, in a decent level of comfort, out of the heat and dust. We'd intended to have all this done earlier, but people kept arriving and demanding to be updated."

The glow didn't so much as flicker.

No one else's did either, and everyone got a turn, since the King had already gone, they couldn't properly refuse, could they? No one balked even. Well, so... as bitter as Tor had felt about the whole thing, at least there was that. Even Ward looked satisfied, or at least didn't have blood in his eyes any more. Trice still looked upset, but she didn't cry, which made Tor love her just a little more at that moment. Her crying was a torment. On top of everything he couldn't have taken that right now.

"Great, someone want to let the guards out, since they obviously haven't figured it out yet for themselves?" Looking at the Prince, Tor shrugged. "It's just a missing sigil..."

The Prince tilted his head, hair still dark, or at least looking dark in the dim light, after a bit he licked his lips.

"And... a sigil... is just a place for people to focus their attention, and mark which device is which? Something not really needed at all, it's the intent that does the work?"

Tor nodded, then turned it into a half bow.

So he really had been listening for all those years at school? It made him feel a little better. The guy was an accounting student after all, and Tor had always wondered if he just nodded his head and murmured polite things when Tor had talked about building. Apparently not. Rolph went to the nearest magic house and slapped the wall lightly, turning the whole thing off. The hot and tired men inside sank to the ground slowly, most of them ending up lying naked in the dirt. He'd left them in their skivvies, but they apparently decided that even that bit of material was too warm. Unlike how they'd treated their prisoners, Tor asked for water to be brought them first thing. Water that wasn't even tainted. After they were all released, it would be their turn to be questioned.

Most of them didn't know any more than Tor suspected they would about their orders. Go and do, mainly, which was reasonable

enough. They followed the lead of the Captain and copied what everyone else was doing. Some of the men knew it was a bit harsh, but figured that the prisoners must have been in on the attack, since Ward was with them and all, and really, no one liked him that well right now, after having declared war on them. None of them had recognized Tor for who he was at all it seemed, and had been picking on him because he was the smallest male in the group and clearly wasn't a noble. They were mainly bored they said. Watching people like that all day had been hot and not all that interesting, so they'd made a game of it.

Oh. Well that made it all right then.

So if he'd been the thirteen year old boy he looked like to them instead of an adult, that would have made it all right for them to break his nose and hit him? Be deprived of water in the hot sun when he was already badly dehydrated and had nearly died the day before? The women and Smythe had been given something to drink, but even the Count had been denied.

That, it turned out, had been ordered. Very clearly, and by name. Ward wasn't to receive any kindness at all and harsh treatment was recommended.

With that bit of information the whole command structure of the city guard was turned out, even before true dawn broke. The Commander was cleared, having basically just repeated the King's words verbatim, adding only suggestions for food, cool drinks and even light entertainment for the high ranking guests. Cards and dice, even music. He called them guests and apparently meant it, enough so that it didn't show up as a lie. The man was old. Smythe old, not just a little gray at the edges. He had steel in his spine and looked truly outraged at what had transpired. Without hesitation he offered to resign on the spot. The King looked at the others and then finally at Tor.

"Well Master Tor, you seem to have gotten the worst of it. I'll leave it to you." He looked blank again.

Tor glared at the King and snorted more than a little derisively.

"Right. Put his fate in the hands of the enraged man while he's still in a snit?" Tor sighed and shook his head. "Let's find out what happened first. If it turns out he's responsible for it, then we can give him the boot later. No need ruining his job over what he's said so far." Looking at the man he shrugged.

"We didn't get the musicians though. If you paid for them you might want to look into that."

The man had to fight a smile from his face but he nodded.

It went just like that until they got to the Major in charge, the broken nosed Curtis's direct boss. When he'd given the orders they'd

changed dramatically. Cruelly. Special orders had been given to be hard on Count Ward, which meant the rest of them were treated in a similar fashion.

Smythe laid into the man so harshly Tor almost expected him to strike the fellow. It seemed like a good idea, to Tor at least. He decided to help if Smythe moved on the man. Not that the councilor needed it, not armed and shielded as he was, but the Major had a decent shield too.

Tor could turn it off.

Instead it was just more pointed questions and asking if he was a spy for anyone, which he was, a Duke Fram that Tor had never heard of, and if he or Fram was working with the Austrans which they didn't seem to be. No, this, he assured them quite openly, was personal.

"That git got my sister pregnant, and then set her aside without a by your leave! Half my wages go to keeping her and her child fed and housed. I can't even afford a wife because of it, not even as a Major! I saw a chance for a little pay back and took it. None can say I don't have the right!" It was all true, and he pointed at Count Ward which made so much sense no one even asked if the Major, a man named Jarad, was really certain. Ward just shrugged. He'd gotten a lot of girls pregnant over the years, hadn't he? It went unsaid, which was good, or the brightly clad guard probably would have attacked the Count then and there.

Tor brought the little magic chest and the remaining gold over to the man.

"OK... For your sister, here's some gold to tide her over, so you can have a normal life and not be stuck taking care of her with all your resources. It's... a couple hundred gold? Have her get with me and I'll come up with some kind of business for her, I have a couple things that might work, so she won't have to struggle too much until we can find her a proper husband if that's what she wants."

The man's mouth hung open.

"That's to help fix things with her though, since she's innocent in all this, as for the rest..." Tor disabled the old shield around the man's neck with a thought and kicked him in the groin. Hard. Twice. When the man went down clutching himself he applied a boot to the side of his head a couple of times and then kicked him in the nose until it popped. After that he grabbed the man by the hair along with one arm and manhandled the limp body to the side, then set up a house around him with no door and hid the amulet again. Leaving the heat on full blast.

"Let him out in about eight hours. That should do the trick I think. Unless anyone else wants to take a turn beating him? I think we can all see how this happened now and let go of any hard feelings. I'll

even lend an amulet to heal all the broken noses. But let me repeat what I told everyone earlier. Anyone ever tries to take me prisoner again and I fight. I won't be gentle about it like I was this time either."

He glared at the guardsmen and then asked if that would be enough for the day, so everyone else could go get some rest. The King agreed with a regal nod. He offered the transport for their comfort, but Tor didn't want to wait, since the royals would need it first, so everyone got Not-flyers instead, those being so easy to use it didn't even take real practice, and they zipped around the outside of the city in a few minutes. Tor stared at the wall as they passed. It was pretty. White stone material, but smooth and un-seamed. When they got around to the other side he saw a palace where his house had been.

Last time it had been a castle, an old fashioned stone looking thing. Now it looked like the King actually lived here, and the poor looking place inside the wall was housing for peasants or something. Maybe a school or hospital. It was cream and white with delicate barding all around and looked almost like a wedding cake, not a place to live. Like the Wards estate, only nicer, fresher. Tor almost blanched at the wasted resources, then remembered it was all just a shield anyway, no matter what it looked like. He took everyone to the front door, almost hesitating to enter, because it looked so very different, only to have Collette and Petra come out at the same time, wearing different, but equally stunning outfits, both in bright pink. They both froze for a second, seeing all the people, but then they ran to start passing out hugs.

Or at least tried to. Everyone except Maria was still wearing a shield. Even the man Tor recognized as selling drinks at the estates parties. That baffled Collette, and put Petra on alert instantly, her training was in military matters, so she got what everyone being shielded like that meant instantly.

"Everyone inside, go, go! The whole place is shielded. Come in, we weren't expecting guests but please be welcome." Her voice was stressed suddenly, just on the verge of going all military and harsh. She hid it with a smile, polite and warm. Once inside the huge marble room everyone started taking their shields down, The Ward people first, then all of them. Tor felt uneasy but forced himself to do it too. Varley had been right when she told him they couldn't connect to the world properly living behind a shield all the time. It just felt so exposed without one anymore.

Before Tor could go collect his own hugs, or even say hello, Countess Ward ran to Petra and Collette, both being her family, and started speaking in a fast high pitched voice. Practically a panicked squeak. Tor wouldn't have been able to make out what she said, but apparently Collette was a master of it. For all that his friend had

always said she didn't get along very well with Maria, she certainly seemed to manage her all right.

It started with a hug that Petra joined in on after a few more lines, which developed into cooing and petting her back and hair as the Countess spoke about the horrible experience she'd had. It would have made sense if she was stressed about the attack, how scared she was, even how betrayed she felt by Laval, though that particular Larval was probably long dead already. Hard to tell.

No, she was going on about the poor accommodations at the palace instead, as if a broom closet wasn't good enough for her? They'd actually given her one of the nice rooms in the guest house. Yes, she had to share with four others, but it wasn't like they put her in the tool shed. Even then, it would have been a roof and walls, wouldn't it? For the first time he could ever remember Tor suddenly felt a wave of relief and gratitude that he'd been brought up as the son of a village baker, not the heir to a county. He knew first hand that what they had was better than most people even dreamed about. Even the room they were in made him uneasy in its grandeur, and it wasn't even real. Still, no need to goad the girl Tor decided.

She really had been through a lot too.

He gently pulled Collette aside, since she was the main house person really.

"Do we have rooms for everyone? I invited them all to stay, but I forgot about King's week and how crowded everything gets..." Sure, they could expand, but a small village of vendors had started to grow around them, so if they wanted more space, they needed to grab it now and possibly bribe a few merchants to shift positions, cover their land rent or something maybe? Or run water to their new set ups, carrying water in a bucket was a pain and the river really wasn't clean enough to drink, which meant getting that water from in the city, nearly a mile long round trip. It was a good point, so he decided to set up water anyway.

They could bribe any vendors they needed to the old fashioned way. With gold.

Collette grinned and let her short blond hair bob a little as she nodded. If she looked a little pleased with herself, well, it made sense given what she told him next.

"We have one hundred rooms ready for guests, not including our own. If that isn't enough I left room on the upper floor for a staircase, and we can just add another level or two. Or more. It's King's week after all, so we may need to. I'm pretty proud of how things look. Don't you like it?"

Tor kissed her warmly which got a look from Maria, a bit of a scowl from Trice, and Petra coming over to join in. After a second

Sara did too. Much to his amazement she kissed everyone, if on the cheek. Him on the mouth though. It got a chuckle, and Maria actually stamped her foot at them. When he turned she had both hands on her hips and a wry smile on her face.

“Hey! Isn't everything supposed to be about me?”

Marvin ran over and picked her up by the waist, his hands, huge as they were, wrapped most of the way around.

“Always love. Right now though I think, if it's not an imposition, I'd like to sleep, after drinking about four gallons of the coldest water I can find. I think I speak for everyone in that...”

His point was well made and Tor felt thirsty again too, now that it was mentioned. They let Maria explain everything, since she'd heard it all over and over again, she even got most of it right. Her telling made their walk, which had been mildly uncomfortable, sound like a death march and when she got to the part about Prince Alphonse and Countess Thorgood apologizing to the servants she grimaced and sounded a bit grudging.

“I have to grant that they had style about it. Everyone else was standing with their nose in the air as if our people weren't worth an apology, but they didn't. I thought the King was going to burst though, when Tor gave everyone that gold and invited us to stay here with him as personal guests. I didn't know what kind of place you'd have Tor, but I wasn't thinking this. It's the nicest place I've ever seen. I would have lived in one of the little magic houses, with everyone, before going back though.” She stopped for a second, looked around and continued with the Major Jarad story. She didn't spare her husband in it either.

“So it might have been just, if it had been Marvin alone. Sorry honey, but you have to keep better track of your children from now on. The man has every reason to be angry with you, and we need to repay Tor for the gold he delivered as soon as we can. Thank you for that Tor, it was most generous of you, and something we should have done ourselves already. Still, we should probably have the Major killed for what he did to everyone else.” She said it so casually that it almost slipped past him that it wasn't just an off-hand comment, or said in jest.

The Count gave her a small head bow and Trice looked more than a little bloodthirsty herself. The others all looked uneasy with the talk of killing, so at least there was that. Then they weren't high royals, just real people that had recent experience with abuse of power.

“No.” The word just slipped out of his mouth, but he smiled and shook his head to soften it.

“He made us uncomfortable and grumpy, but now it's his turn. That's justice. Doing more would be taking it too far. We'll give it a

few days and set up a meeting with him, talk it all out and fix it so that it doesn't happen again. I mean, if someone got one of my sisters pregnant outside of wedlock and didn't marry her, I'd be doing a good bit more than making him stand out in the sun for a while. That these others were caught up in it is bad, but not worth the man's death." Of course he didn't say what that retribution would be exactly. Possibly a stern letter writing campaign? Tipping his cows until they didn't produce milk anymore?

Most of the other men in the room nodded, which got a sour look from the Count, since it was a clear rebuke, and from most of the room, then he sighed.

"Fine. But he at least needs to apologize to each of the innocents harmed by his actions. In person if possible. If Prince Alphonse had to apologize for him the least he can do is make that part right for himself." It didn't even sound overly bitter.

That got a nod from everyone else too. Tor figured he'd had his revenge already as far as that went. You couldn't reasonably expect a very good apology from a man you'd kicked in the head with intent, could you?

Collette moved into action like everything had already been planned almost startling in her efficiency and skill. It was seamless. All Tor had to do was drink more water from the tap in his bathroom until he couldn't hold anymore, take a quick shower, and sleep until he felt like getting up. That was his plan at least.

It wasn't to be, since at about one in the afternoon someone jumped on him. The shield caught the blow but he very nearly started swinging wildly before he heard the familiar warm chuckle.

"Ursa? Hey... how's my favorite Countess doing?" It was a sleepy mutter and only her arm pulling at him kept him from going back to sleep. The bed was soft and the room was cool. He wore a shield but nothing else, since he'd almost fallen into bed. Giggling she asked him to drop the shield. Actually she said, "what kind of welcome is this? Drop the shield silly!"

So he did, and expected a kiss as a reward. That being the tradition. To his surprise she did something else entirely, her head going much lower. She did use her mouth for it though, a trail of kisses moving past his belly button. For a moment he felt awkward and ungainly and nearly pulled her head up. It was daylight out and he could see what she was about to do. This wasn't some fumbling or whispered lesson in the dark like before. Well, she'd never fumbled, but he had. A lot.

Tor thought about it and shrugged. Was it right to let her do something like this? Yes, her social rules said it was. More, he really liked her. If he got her pregnant would he marry her? Tor nearly

nodded, but her mouth touched his lower parts, a warmth covering him slowly, pressure from her tongue swirling around him. She wasn't too hurried, but there was a sense of urgency about her actions that almost didn't fit his sleepy and drifty mood. Well, if it was to be quick, he'd have to do something for her at the same time, wouldn't he?

It took her a second to realize what he was moving in place for and another fifteen for her to get her clothes out of the way, not having magic ones yet.

He'd fix that.

It would make this all so much more convenient if nothing else. Tor found her sex with his mouth gently at first, hitting with rapid flicks of his tongue the little nib that he'd been told about, shown really, by her, come to think of it. Even with her on top of him he could see a lot more of her now than he had ever before. It was fascinating, the pink and light tan skin folds in the mound of golden blond hair. It was soft, and did get in his mouth as he worked on her, but he ignored it. If this gave her any pleasure at all, it was worth a little hair, right?

She moaned. At first it was soft, but eventually it was loud enough that he was glad her mouth was full to muffle it a bit. Well, the walls weren't walls and didn't pass sound, so it would likely be all right. The door would since it didn't fit with an air tight seal, but anyone listening at the door had their own problems, didn't they? It was all he could do to wait for her, trying to finish at the same time, using his sense of her field to help him do it. They both shuddered in each other's mouths, throbbing in tune with their heart beats for a while, waves of pleasure washing over them both.

After that she used her tongue to make certain he was clean, so he did the same for her, she stiffened in brief surprise at it, but then purred at him, another sense of pleasure, not as physical, but at least as strong came off of her.

"Hmmm. Someone's been getting some practice. Good. Just remember that I saw you first. Or at least got into your bed first, so I win." She kissed him, using her tongue and lips in a way she hadn't before. It was ardent and serious, like she wanted to do more. After a second she broke from him.

"Since your awake now... I'm supposed to tell you that you're summoned to the palace for luncheon. Formal dress."

Chapter two

“Oh? The King calling me onto the carpet already? If so I'm not really sure why. I mean, I get that he seemed upset with me yesterday,” Tor stopped and shook his head.

“This morning I mean. Still tired. But if he's going to ride me about locking up the city guard...” Then what could he do? Tor had actually done it. It was illegal to interfere with a guard on duty, and stripping them of clothes and locking them up had to count as that for sure. Tor would just have to take his lumps and hope the lash didn't hurt too bad. He'd sneak in an extra healing device just in case.

Ursala gave him a quick kiss. Then a longer one that probably didn't taste that good since he needed to brush his teeth. A shower would be in order as well. Pulling on her arms he dragged the young Countess into the bathroom with him and started the warm water flowing into the huge black tub. She climbed out of her clothing with a grin and joined him, since there was plenty of room. The space was nearly as big as his dorm room had been at school, about fifteen by fifteen. It had a full four person tub too. Overdone just for him, but the actual resource cost was only some water, he reminded himself and that got cleaned and returned to the river when he was finished, so the overall impact was minimal. If anything it improved the poor quality of the river slightly.

She shook her head a little and touched his arm gently.

“Really, it's not that, or at least no one mentioned that being the case. Everyone just wants to make certain you're alright and see what the plans are now. You and Smythe were looking for the Austrans and inside a week you found them. I'm not joking here either, even if they did attack you rather than being hunted down. No one has ever gotten one of their assassins alive before, much less a whole team. The arm and leg thing was a bad idea though. Effective, maybe needed, but too many of the Counts are considering it as punishment for sever crimes. It's even been suggested for Major Jarad.” Most of this got said while he was washing her back, just using his hands on her soft flesh, working suds out of the weak lavender scented soap. It wasn't his kind, but since Collette was in charge, they bought what she wanted. With his money of course, since that was only appropriate. Her house skills were amazing. Tor probably would have just been living in one of his little original houses and washing with sand if not for her.

The thought made his mind jump and skitter for a moment. Were there different kinds of spies for different tasks? Ones trained to be good husbands or wives, others to be whores and transport drivers? Well, that last thing was new, but the idea probably held. If you

wanted to track military doings you got a military man. Or a whore that serviced them.

Tor had to show Ursala how to use the magical clothing when they got out, but the instant she got the idea, she loved it. If nothing else, he assured her, it would cut her clothing budget and make packing easier.

“Screw it.” He said, loading a small box with them suddenly. She raised her eyebrows.

“Harder to beat up on Tor when he just delivered a box of prezzies to your wife and daughters, isn't it?” Tor pantomimed a whip being used. “Lash. “But daddy look at my pretty new dresses!” Lash. “I can make it glow.” Lash. “Isn't Tor so wonderful daddy?” Distracting if nothing else, right?”

She kissed his cheek and helped him design something that would say both “formal” and “please don't beat me too much”. It was a heavy green velvet coat over a darker green silk button up shirt, with black velvet pants and dark green boots that shone like mirrors. It even had a belt though it didn't need it. That was black though, with a glossy silver buckle on it. Nice and elegant enough for a luncheon or even dinner at the palace, but not flashy or eye catching. No red to spur on combat rages or simple blood lust. Her reasoning sounded like rote learning, which she assured him it was.

“Didn't you have that class in school too? I thought everyone had that. It was always right before the class on recognizing spies.” The funny thing was that she sounded dead serious about it.

She had a new shield when they left too, which got her to make pleased noises as if it were just a glowy necklace instead of a device to keep her alive. That was a real problem he knew. No one wanted to wear one all the time, it made everything harder to do, like wearing gloves did. But if an attack came and you weren't ready, most people also forgot to turn it on in time. Sometimes you didn't even know you needed it until it was too late. Tor's spine ached in remembered pain from his own experience with that, a boot to the back that kicked him down some stairs.

He could fix that flaw, by having an automatic turn on for it, but it would have to be incredibly sophisticated to handle all real world threats. It would have to do that, turn on perfectly when needed, since most people would grow used to using it and forget to turn it on in times of potential danger, just counting on it to protect them anyway.

It was nice that she thought it looked good enough to be real jewelry. It was just dirt from outside with a bit of cow leather, so maybe she was just being kind to him about it? He had to remember that, who she was. He may get to play with her like it was something real, but in the end he was just her stable boy, and the junk he made a

few wild flowers tied together with hemp string. It was easy to forget that sometimes because she was so nice to him, but that's really what it came down to. Tor was a servant, the kind that made things for you on demand, not an equal.

Well, that was nothing new.

They rode together to the palace, in a carriage, which Tor disliked in the main, but could put up with for his friend, since she actually thought it was special and tasteful. Not-flyers didn't allow for a lot of dignity, did they? People floating around like ghosts, right hand in the air to point their way. Fine for him and the kids, but the high royals didn't use them in the streets and Ursala was that for sure.

It was faster getting into the palace in a carriage though, and they'd probably let Tor in, which was never really certain. Twice he'd been turned away. Everyone had claimed it was a mistake, but how hard was it to let someone in who was expected? Just approaching the black metal bars made him want to turn around and leave the city all together anymore. This wasn't a comfortable place for him at all. It was too nice, too much had been spent on it, and bad things kept happening here. Attempts on his life, finding out unpleasant truths.

"Do you have need of bakers up in Thorgood?" It was an idle question really, since he was needed to work here for now. But after the war, maybe they'd let him go?

Distantly, since she was reading papers, the Countess murmured softly.

"Sure. Considering a career change?" Her voice was light, not really paying attention it seemed.

"Thinking about it."

It was clear she was busy, and as much as he hated doing it, Tor shut off his shield and pulled the two blank bits of light tan from his pocket. The field to go on then was both old and new, and the decorations had to be too. Something unique. This was special. When activated, these would glow a brilliant purple, he decided. He had nearly an hour left to work, enough time if he could manage to go deep enough. Only this time it was different. Not bad, or scary, but he blinked and they were there. The new one up device in his hand had writing on it, as he'd intended, but he couldn't remember doing the work. It was perfect. He could feel that without hardly trying. Good enough, but a bit novel in how it happened. He'd encountered a little of that kind of thing before, but this was different, like a single blink instead of an hour. Not even a full single breath.

It felt odd.

Tor was still really deep in a trance state when he was led by the arm into the dining room. It wasn't filled with hundreds of people, but a good dozen sat around the table. Some he knew well, some he

didn't. For some reason they sat him next to Connie again. They did that every now and then, as if it were a joke, since it was technically the forth most important place at the table and putting him there, he'd learned, would tell the world that he was either her top advisor, or her lover.

And he obviously wasn't her advisor was he?

She looked radiant as always, her skin clear and reddish brown hair artfully arranged, today pins with small butterflies in multiple colors in enamel held everything in place. That along with her gauzy light blue gown and white shift made her look very cool and comfortable. She reached out and took his hand gently as he sat.

"Are you well?" It was a murmur, polite and concerned, but said softly so no one else could hear. She actually wanted to know then? It had taken a lot of time and he had so much to figure out, but bits and pieces were starting to come together for him as far as courtly graces. Unless he was just dead wrong and it was a polite bit of small talk.

He leaned toward her, which made half the people smirk and half raise their eyebrows. What did they think he was going to do, jump up and hump her leg at the table? The idea would be amusing, but since he didn't want to be castrated, Tor spoke instead, his words equally low.

"Physically I'm fine. A little shaken mentally, but only when I'm not working. Tired, but when am I not? You?" It came out automatically, someone asked how you were, you asked back. He expected her to say fine, or that she was well, but instead she whispered "later", as if it were a subject too delicate for the table. It made Tor uneasy. What would have the Queen reluctant to speak of it at table? It couldn't be good.

No business was covered during the meal, but the second it was over and the dishes cleared, drinks were poured and the work began. Tor made himself both relax and stifle a yawn at the same time. He was a bit tired, but five hours sleep was more than he often got. The events of the last few days were weighing on him, but that was probably normal. Every other time he'd nearly been killed he was tired after too. Sometimes for months, like when he'd been poisoned.

The King gave a seated bow, getting one back from Tor, even though no one else did it. Oops. Rich just mumbled "honored" and started speaking then to the room.

"We have a few issues to discuss here, if everyone is ready? Good. First, with the holiday upon us the palace is about to be full to over brimming and we suddenly have thirty-six guests we hadn't expected from county Ward. I won't put them out, not after their ordeal, but things are going to be tight space wise, any suggestions?" Richard looked at everyone including him so he raised his hand a little, like in

school. The King smiled and it even looked real.

“Tor, you have something?”

“I have some room and they're all invited to come stay with me, if they want.” It sounded oddly shy.

The King and Queen both looked at him with the same polite look that they always gave him when they wondered if he could handle something, and really thought the bumpkin just couldn't. Well, they'd be right this time, except he had friends to help him. Collette and Petra at least. They needed some servants, for cooking and light cleaning. The house mainly did that, making the beds and cleaning the tubs and toilets, but unless people wanted to eat out all the time they needed someone for that. Several if more people might be coming to visit too.

Ursala smiled and let her face go a bit dreamy.

“Ohhh yes. It's incredible in there. Easily as nice as here. Nicer in some ways, hot showers and baths for instance, in all the rooms. Every room is cool all the time, unless you want it warmer. Magic lights all over and decorated to a level I wish my own house was. They shouldn't feel slighted by it at all once they see it...”

That caught the Queen's attention especially.

“How many do you have room for?” She gave him a look that made him suspicious. It wasn't one of her normal ones, and she wasn't being playful either. It was, he guessed, her strategic look.

“Well, a hundred rooms at the moment. Less with the Ward people. We can add more, I think another two or three levels worth without stressing the limits of the thing, possibly more. We may want to trigger the Falcons for boat races and water show, Sorry, off topic... I need some staff. How do you hire people like that? I have gold for it, I just don't know who to ask.” His voice started to sound plaintive and young, but he relaxed it in time to leave it sounding nearly like it always did. Just a little out of his depth.

Yep, normal.

The Queen waved.

“Not a problem, we can move some people around and hire the relatives. Palace servants seem to have a never ending supply of friends and relatives looking for a good position. We can tell them about it tonight. I'll set Quavel to it. Just have them arrive and start working?”

Tor suggested it go through Petra or Collette, since he didn't want to mess anything up. Collette by preference, but she was running the ice manufactory, so may not have the time.

An older man a few places down the table on the far side focused on him intently, with a large grin.

“Oh! I've been using that myself. Dead handy having ice that

available, and so cheaply. You might want to put up another one if it can be done for the festivals. Demand will go up then, especially if the price can be lowered just a bit. Not trying for cheaper ice, but it's true." Tor could see the basic idea, it was good advice.

"I can do that. Today probably. I have another six of them ready to go. I'll get with Collette on it. Please let me know if you have any more ideas sir, I'm far from the best when it comes to finances. I mean what's best for people and all that. I can pay my rent and bills, but past that..." It was true. It wasn't that he was stupid, he hoped not at least, but trading a device that he made, and could sell for fifty gold, for a loaf of bread still seemed like a fair bargain. Almost, anyway. It took about the same work time, so it was even, wasn't it? No one else seemed to think so though.

"Certainly. Indeed, I'd love to talk to you about the subject if you ever have time..." The man gave him a serious look, but the King chuckled at him.

"Tor, Johanson is our finance Counselor. The best I've ever seen at making a coin. Not bad at spending them either." The tone wasn't even dry or teasing. Real admiration flowed into the words instead.

The man spread his hands on the table, the move told Tor that he didn't want the King to say more on the topic, and that he was originally from the same part of the world Tor had come from. The King stopped, but if he got it or not wasn't clear.

Johanson spoke with authority then, but still seemed genuinely happy. Possibly at the idea of cheaper ice.

"Festivals are important to the economy of the Capital. People spend money, which allows the poorest a chance to make some as well. If you give money away, or even bread, people eventually suffer. Mentally and economically. If you give them valuable work, they can buy not just a loaf of bread, but enough to keep themselves and a family fed."

It sounded off topic to everyone else probably but Tor nodded.

"Exactly. I know it's better to do things that way, but how do I use my golds to help make jobs? I mean a few small ones, making and selling ice or selling some stuff I made, but what else? I keep drawing a blank on it myself."

Johanson let his brow furrow and rested his elbow on the table getting a smirk from Rolph, but it didn't bother Tor. If the man needed to break a few social rules to think, who was he to tell him to stop, and possibly ruin whatever he came up with?

"Well... There's a military manufactory using something called "focus stone" that has wide potential civilian applications. I caught a bit of a demonstration at the ice festival. We're holding that annually aren't we? Brilliant concept and we should add a few more

celebrations and large parties, some shows and such too, keep morale up once the heavy fighting starts. Everyone's forgetting we're at war, because no one's dying yet. Add a patriotic flare and people will respond right now, then it won't be as big a shock when the damage starts." The man looked down.

"Train of thought, sorry, where was I? Focus stone. Amazing stuff. Low overhead. Hard to get hold of the devices to generate it though, but grab up a few hundred and start businesses all over the kingdom making... well almost everything. Ship it by air and sea. You and your friends have the local market in making ice, but what about delivery? People will pay to have it at their home or shop and that's more jobs. Plus, one city, even the Capital, is only one city. There are probably several hundred in the kingdom that could support such things. A few thousand jobs if you're creative about it, more if you aren't too worried about your own share of the profits. Food too. We have enough, but it's in the wrong places. New shipping outfit from Duke Morgan and his folk, but they could expand and keep even rural areas fed all winter."

The man gave him a sly look.

"If the right devices could be come up with I mean. You understand. Hard to get things like that. Especially with a war on."

Everyone stared at him as if he might be too dense to take the man's meaning. Tor looked around and stuck his tongue out while furrowing his brow. He wasn't stupid, not once the obvious was pointed out. Mainly.

"I can have that ready in a few days. Slower if I'm supposed to go back to military manufacturing at the same time though. But..."

The King and Queen both shook their heads, when Tor looked around, so was everyone else. Even Johanson.

Richard spoke his voice suddenly not amused at all.

"No. You're taking a break for at least two weeks. I'll give you a few days to get everything in order, then no work. Also... We'd prefer it if you didn't leave the Capital during that time. Things are tense right now, with this latest attack and the Council of Counts is asking for this as well as myself and almost everyone else. Even the staff here has chimed in on it, and the Royal Guard... That you take a break for a while. A real one. Work yourself to death and we lose you. People are worried. So, no work. Just play. Have fun. Avoid stogy parties, except mine of course. You have to make an appearance there to reassure people after the Larval attack on Ward, look festive and cheery, and stay out of fights. That kind of thing." There was a bit of airy hand waving to go with the last bit.

Well, he could meet the time limit, if he tried hard and didn't get too ambitious, he had all the work he'd done in Ward already, but

well, there was so much to do. Couldn't they see that? If Tor stopped he was failing everyone. Letting them suffer because he was lazy. It wasn't that the King was wrong, of course, but he'd had breaks and vacations. Defensively he pointed this out, he remembered taking them.

Rolph snorted at him.

"When Tor? Name one time and I'll go plead your case to the Council of Counts myself tomorrow. Just one." His friend looked curious more than anything else. Probably wondering when Tor had been goofing off. Well, he had one right there didn't he? Rolph was even there for it.

"You Trice, Sara and I went to the beach, remember? Less than a year ago even." It was the nicest real vacation he'd ever had. The only thing he'd ever done before that was camping with his brothers and their friends for a few days each summer as kids.

"Oh? Right, I remember that. You built test models for the River Tor and sat in front of a fire for a few hours while the rest of us got drunk. Do better."

How high was the bar here anyway? Tor scrambled mentally.

"Um, the river is "The Falcons" not the "Pretension River" so, please try to use that name for it? As to the rest... Well I had a long break at school last year... I just lounged around in bed for days. You have to remember that." Was he the only one that saw these things? The others were there though, they had to know...

"What? Oh, that? Sure... You stayed in bed for nearly three days indeed... I do remember that. Just lounging as you said. Of course. After you nearly died of poison. Then you got up and went back to classes, barley able to speak and hobbling around like a two hundred year old man. Are you seeing a trend here yet?" The Prince leaned forward and steepled his fingers.

"When was the last time you even did something just for fun? Not planning a work project or doing something for someone else, just doing something because you enjoyed it?"

That was a good question, and he had a good answer, but he couldn't say, because it wouldn't be discrete. Ursala gave him a sly look but didn't say anything either. What else did he have? He... didn't do anything fun. What was fun anyway? Well, he was going to throw a big party and he'd been part of the ice festival, so that had kind of been fun and he hadn't worked really, had he? Given stuff away and all that, but did getting other people to do stuff count as work?

Varley had been nearly silent the whole time, but she looked over at him and smiled, if a little morosely, so it probably wasn't about him.

Karina looked... horrible, like she hadn't slept in a week or eaten in nearly that long. Really bad. God, she hadn't gotten pregnant by Ward too had she? Tor checked her field, but she just seemed exhausted and really sad. Miserable. Had something happened? Her younger sister, pregnant by a married man, reached over and squeezed her hand gently and she didn't flinch away. So it was pretty bad, whatever it was.

Rolph seemed unaware. Totally.

“Hey, that palace of yours is basically a shield right? So no one should care if I come stay with you for vacation? Unless that's work for you?”

Actually, Tor considered it for a minute and decided it really would be nice to have him over, if it was OK with the King and Queen and all the Royal Guards. He didn't want to strip them from the palace while they were needed.

Tor had an idea though, which could help with that a little.

“I know, why not have Kolb and his fighting instructors down for the celebrations? I don't think even the Royal Guard would be too uneasy about it then. His folk could get practice guarding people and blending into a crowd. If you're going to teach fighters, knowing what a guard does can't hurt. Lots of fighters do that between wars, don't they?”

It was a better force than those out of the loop probably knew, unless their spies were really good. The royal families own squad of go anywhere, do anything combat giants. Besides, some of them were his friends. He should probably invite the women of industry down too, but then again King's week was probably a big gold making time for them even at Wildlands Station. People partied and got drunk, which meant they spent more. And really, up there they didn't have any competition, not even from wives and girlfriends. He hoped that Godfrey was keeping his people in line with them. If he had to Tor would go back and make that happen. They were his girls in a weird, backhand sort of way.

“Besides, that will give you a chance to apologize and grovel to Maria Ward so we can finally put that whole thing to rest before she goes all “Countess Wylde” on us again. Really at this point I almost don't care what went on, but you told her that you loved her and then let the poor little bumpkin take the fall out of your putting her off. Go ahead and hang your head in shame now.” Tor waved at him, telling him to actually do it. Rolph didn't, but his face did seem embarrassed at least and he went beet red. It was a start.

“We'll wait while you do a proper job of it. We're not letting you off the hook, and heir or not, the King and Queen will simply not let this go. Neither will the bumpkin.” He crossed his arms in front of him

sternly. It probably made him look like his mother, but Tor didn't back away from it. Someone had to call Rolph on this and if his own best friend wouldn't, who in the world would?

The Queen looked shocked. No... horrified.

So there were things you didn't do just to save someone's feelings? Or maybe it was about Tor confronting the heir like that in front of others? That didn't seem right, she watched her own son, not him. Everyone else stared at the Prince too. They already knew about it, some of them at least, but this must have been the first time they'd actually given it any thought since it was uncovered. Well, everyone had been busy, Tor could see forgetting it even. Maria Ward wasn't exactly everyone's favorite right now, what with that little war thing and all.

Tor added, just so Rolph wouldn't try to wiggle out, what Maria had said while wearing the truth device, so that the rest of the table would know too.

"So, we know it's true. Your whole family heard it. I can have the device she said it on brought in, or you can question Smythe, he was there too. It wasn't a hedge, or a mistake, or even a delusion. Those would trigger the truth field. It was said, and you said it. Personally, not in a note, not in any way that would release you from responsibility for the words." Tor glared.

After all half of the bad things that had ever happened to him, maybe more than half, could be tracked to that one event. Tor could let it go for his own sake, Rolph had already apologized after all, to him, and what were a few beatings and attempts on a life between friends?

But to tell a girl you loved her, to say that to anyone, if you didn't mean it... That was low. Most especially if you weren't going to back it up with actions later. He knew Rolph to be a good guy, a great friend and loyal to the extreme, but Tor could sure see why Maria Ward might have thought differently.

The Prince held up a hand, then two, palms out, more of a warding off of potential violence than just a signal to let him talk.

"Look, I said it, but well, we were in bed and she said "I love you." so I said I loved her too. It was stupid, but I wasn't trying to get her to have sex with me or anything, we already were... Things said while having sex don't count." He looked down and hunched his shoulders.

It made Tor jump, when Karina's hand slapped the table hard.

"It obviously counted to her didn't it?" She stood and stormed all the way around the table and started slapping the Prince on the face angrily. He covered his head but didn't fight back or even make a sound.

“You lied to her and she loved you, then you hurt her you... jerk! Why are you even sitting here when you should be on your knees begging forgiveness right this instant, not laughing with your friend about taking a vacation. Tor... make him apologize!” She hit him in the side of the head with a really well placed open hand blow that took him off his seat. Given their size difference that meant she was really striking him, it wasn't something playful or pretend for effect.

The King and Queen both looked at the scene serenely and everyone else either looked away or down at their plates rather than the scene of violence. Right. Violence at the table was rude. Even in Two Bends it had been unheard of, but who could say anything to a Princess about it?

She was right in this case too.

Karina moved in for another round of blows when Tor stood. Walking around the table he slowly put a hand out and touched her shoulder. Rather than slap at it or hit him, which he kind of thought she might do, as worked up as she was, Karina turned and buried her head in his shoulder. He hugged her and patted her back. Tor didn't get the why of it, but this close he couldn't help but feel the pain and sadness pouring off of her.

“It's alright. Um, may we be excused for a few moments? I think we need to talk. Prince Alphonse, Princess Veronica, if you'll come with us?” God, he sounded like one of them suddenly. Well, it was what he should be doing here, but how different was that? It just came out like it was natural or something. Spooky. He'd even gotten the accent right, all royal and courtly.

Before they left, hesitating for a second, not knowing if he'd be back or not, Tor put the new amulet set he'd made on the way over flat on the table and dug out six silvers which got set beside it. Everyone looked at him funny for a moment, so he explained his odd behavior with a small bow. Best to be polite when you were asking favors, right?

“Bribe for Kenner Thorgood. It was to be three silvers and a military grade Not-flyer, but he had to go toe to toe with several Royal Guards to alert everyone about the Larval attack, so I added a bit. Hazard pay. The Not-flyer has his name on it, so there should be no mistake as to ownership at any point. It also has an impact shield for safety. Military speed though, so tell him to be careful please? If someone could see he gets it?”

Connie took them and set both aside with a small smile and bow of her own.

“I'll see to it personally Master Tor.” Her voice didn't sound happy, but not as upset as he'd have thought given the scene with her children.

Tor nodded to her in thanks then turned to leave, but had to turn back, remembering something.

“Ah, right. I, uh, also promised him that if there was to be any punishment for his having carried my message, extra work, or a beating, that I'd take it in his stead. If someone could pass that along to whomever is in charge of him? They can send a note if I need to report for it.”

That got a soft chuckle from the table, except for the King who simply nodded and raised his right hand. Tor knew that it would really be done then. It was a freaky palace thing they all did sometimes, just indicating they wanted something done, knowing it would happen without question.

They moved, not into the hall as he kind of figured they would, but through a door in the corner of the room, that just led to a space with a few chairs and a tiny sofa just big enough for two people. It wasn't a huge place, about ten by ten or so and just a little dark, only a single, rather old, magical light illuminating the whole thing. He sank down slowly so Karina could follow him and sat rocking her for a few moments while she made his velvet coat wet with her salty tears. The other two looked away, but for once in his life Tor didn't let himself withdraw from the awkward scene.

He kept holding her as he gently shifted back and forth.

“Right. Rolph, Prince Alphonse Cordes. After we finish this meeting, and see to your sister's needs, you're going to go and apologize to Maria Ward, bang your head on the floor and cry about the damage you've caused, with a complete list of all your flaws and shortcomings if she wants one. Then if she wants, you'll let her slap you around until her arms won't move anymore. Understood?” Tor didn't even look at him, his main focus going to the Princess in his arms.

“Yes...”

“Good, be ready to mean it too, from the bottom of your soul, because you're wearing a truth device if I have to shove it up your royal ass. They aren't that big and with your sister's help and some lubricant I'm pretty sure we can do it. Now I don't much want to touch your red fuzzy butt myself and I'm certain they don't, but if you force it on us, we'll just have to deal, wont we?” This came out in a low growl that made his throat hurt.

“I'll wear it! God Tor, what's going on? You've never told me to do anything before, except wear my shield, and even then you came at it obliquely. Why is this so important to you? It was a long time ago and I barely even remember it.”

Why was it? Seriously, he had to tell him this stuff?

“Because you're a better person than that. You don't do that, and

you don't let things like that just go if you do mess up. That's why. This isn't about her, not now. An apology now won't help her at all, too much time has passed. It's about you and the kind of person you already are. No one wants to live in a kingdom with an heir that won't make things right if he screws up. I'm just here to help make sure you don't forget that." At least this came out sounding a little less like he actually intended to shove things up his friends behind.

Tor sighed softly. A year ago he wouldn't have even gotten why that was dirty, not in a sexual way at least. Of course given how huge his friend was, nearly seven foot tall now, if it ever came to it, he definitely wanted to be the one shoving and not receiving.

The idea made him want to shudder a bit.

That was the easy part. Getting Rolph to do the right thing rarely took more than pointing it out after all. The hard part would be getting the story of her misery out of Karina. It was cowardly of him to want to get away from it, so he sat and let her cry and held her tighter than he ever had before. They were friends and he'd given her loads of stuff, but that was just because. She'd wanted the things, so he'd given them to her. Varley didn't tattle about her sister's pain, and if the Prince knew he was doing a really good job of acting like he didn't.

Finally, unbidden, the girl in his arms, head never lifting, explained.

"It's Lilli. Since she got her eye fixed, well, she's pretty now, and she met this guy, and so, well, she told me that she loved me and we were close for a long time. We talked about how we could be together even after we were both married, but it was all a lie. I overheard her telling everyone how she was just using me to get magic and how bad I was in bed! She said I was a slut, but I've hardly been with anyone compared to her. She found a guy, she said and he gives her things, stuff you made, worth thousands of golds, and now no one will even talk to me... Everyone is gone. I have no lovers or friends or anything." He'd never heard total dejection before he realized, not even when he'd thought his own life was over. It tore at his heart and nearly made him cry.

Oh. Well, crap.

"I see. Well, that's not going to last long, is it? Box only has so much to give away after all. I gave him a few things to pass along to some girl that's basically whoring herself for trinkets. I guess we know who that is now. He's trying to string them out, but... I guess in a way it's my fault. Well, she's only one of your friends. Aren't you arranging a marriage to David Derring? He's a good sort. Probably my favorite Countier, and that's including my own brothers." It was a desperation move, since as far as he knew she'd only met the guy once, maybe

twice.

She shook her head.

“No, the bloodlines don't work out. It seemed OK at first, but the lines are just on the wrong side of close. He was sweet about the whole thing and... we had sex first, before we knew, it isn't dangerous close, but not socially correct either. Only a little gross though, second cousins more or less. So that's not happening. Everyone is gone. Everyone...” She sobbed again, wet sounding and runny.

“Well not to deny you your moment of grief, which it sounds like you've earned... Been there myself a time or two... Seems to me I wasn't very constructive about it either, made a super-weapon and acted like an ass to a bunch of innocent people mainly. I hope you can skip that part? It's not worth it in the end. It feels like the only way at the time, but it's not. Remember, people love you. Real people that actually count. Your real friends. People that do more than use you for things.”

She sniffled loudly and half wailed at him.

“Like who? And don't say my family! They don't love me, they just put up with me because it's easier than explaining how a whole Princess disappeared. Everyone loves Varley, and Alphonse is the god of men and love of women everywhere.... I'm just the one that... is. The filling in the middle that everyone kind of wishes wasn't there at all. Trout pudding in a cream roll. Mom and Dad haven't even tried to really teach me how to rule. They've taught Varley instead. What does that mean? If Alphie dies I'm not going to make it long am I? Probably a good reason to keep him alive, but not very reassuring as to being loved, is it?”

Ah. Not good. Even if there was an innocent reason for it, trying to really explain it to a distraught and hurting person wasn't going to be easy. Even if she was just wrong, that she thought it was true was enough.

The Prince stood and paced for a few seconds.

“I know why that is, but... Karina, you're not going to like it. I... I promised not to tell you, but I had to know, being the heir... When you were born the doctors diagnosed you with a rare and horrible disorder, I can hardly say the name, it's too awful...” Tor could sense the attempt at humor and frowned. It was the wrong time for it.

Rolph did that, tried to use humor when things got stressful for him.

Horried Karina looked up, “really?”

Great. Just wonderful. The punch line approached and Tor knew it was going to be bad. He hugged her tighter and shook his head.

“Rolph, don't. It's just a stupid joke Karina. He's going to tell you that you're full of shit or something equally stupid. Then tell you that

you have been getting the same education he has, if with less math and what Varley is getting is mainly so when she ends up the Countess whatever or even a Duchess, she can be of value to her husband and her people. What are they teaching you?" The question was a good one, she'd mentioned it to him once, how different her classes were than the others.

"Um, history, geography, fighting, useless stuff to keep me busy while everyone else learns about money and useful things like that. And I take notes for the Counts Council. Endless gods awful notes. My hand aches right this moment from it." As if to prove her point she rubbed her right hand pitifully and a little girl sad face by pursing her lips just a little, holding it out so Tor could see.

It came to him in a flash, a deep thing that he didn't really understand, but it was right. The feeling was there, the sense of wholeness, a real plan, not just happenstance.

Tor started crying.

It looked weak and stupid, but he didn't hide it. She needed to see that he cared. That was more important than his ego. Wasn't it? Finally she asked him what was wrong, looking perplexed.

"Don't you see? Gods it's so unfair... Rolph, Alphonse, has been trained to be a King during a time of peace. You're being trained... to take his place when everything else is lost, and all that's left is war. Then Varley, you'll need her to take over to set it all right. Because if it comes to it... I don't think anyone expects you to survive the war either. Or if you do... I don't think you'll be exactly... sane. Not the way they're training you, certainly not a good leader for peace at any rate. If that happens you'll need to step aside, and let her take over for the good of the kingdom." He held her as Rolph gave him a shocked look and started crying too. Fat tears, real ones, rolling down his cheeks silently.

Varley looked at her brother.

"You knew all this? I mean, it makes sense, now that it's pointed out, but, you knew?"

"Yeah. For a couple of years. It's why I was packed away to "learn to be humble" school and she was encouraged to practice fighting, and learn the history of war and battle while being a little wild. Not reckless, but tough. Hard. The kind of person that sees death dust eating her cousin's arm and not only figures out what to do, but does it. I would have frozen. I couldn't have done it and then Trice would be dead. Oh, she may never thank you for it, but you saved more than her life. A lot of people hang in the balance with her. More than I can say..." Frustratingly he didn't say more. Tor was tempted to try and get it from his field but didn't. Not every secret was for him to know. Not even about Trice. It nagged at him, but that was just too bad.

As if to make the point for him his friend just shook his big head and said he couldn't tell him or let him know. But that he should love her as best he could.

Not cryptic or anything. Not at all.

Karina seemed slightly shaken, but didn't keep crying at least. Tor just felt tired. Couldn't any of them just be kids? Just do stupid stuff, get married and have a job? They all looked pretty bad, except for Varley, who hadn't been beaten or crying. Tor passed the healing device. It didn't change Rolph's eye color, so that only happened with severe ocular damage? Well it was something. He needed to fix that though. Brown was OK, but things like Karina's old friend Lilli could happen, and leave mismatched eyes. Or the device could fail to heal her of bitchiness at all. That was an obvious design flaw on his part. He apologized to Karina for it, getting a weak laugh.

It was something at least.

When they went back a plan was outlined. He'd get his three days to work, starting right after Alphonse came back from apologizing, then, if Maria could handle the sight of the Prince at all, he'd come back and try to make sure Tor didn't work for two weeks. Possibly longer. Tor didn't like that part at all. It sounded like a trap, not a reward for a job well done. Then, had he done well?

Well, he was alive, but really, he could have done that even better staying in the woods where he'd come from. No one even tried to kill him there.

The tiredness didn't leave, it wasn't, he didn't think, a thing of the body. He didn't feel heavy or worn out, just tired. Inside. Like he'd seen too much and it wasn't setting right, dragging him down. So far down.

Rolph was sent into a room alone with Maria and neither came out for hours. A few people smirked as if they were having sex, that being Trice mainly. She kept staring at him too, but didn't say why. It wasn't as glaring now, so that was an improvement. Now she just looked... considering or something. What she had to consider about him Tor didn't know at all. Probably that he better be working on her arm, time off or not.

Which was a good point.

When they came out both had obviously been crying and Rolph had been hit at least a couple of times, a nice bruise forming on the left side of his face. The Prince still had the truth device on and going. Tor was curious as to what was meant, but it wasn't his business, was it? As long as people stopped trying to kill him over it, that was enough. Hopefully this put the issue to bed and they could get on to ruining their lives in whole new ways, maybe with someone else catching most of the fall out next time?

Nah. Tor didn't like to lie to himself. This wasn't over. The wounds went too deep for too long.

After he'd gone in to how he'd made the flower arrangement for her, the one she threw in his face almost immediately, she hadn't bothered to even acknowledge that he'd done a good job. It was a little enough thing, but shouldn't someone have said something? Sorry? Oops? Good thing it wasn't a glass vase? Not brilliant things to mention, but saying nothing was worse, like announcing that he didn't matter at all.

He didn't, but that didn't mean she couldn't try to make him feel better about the whole thing. Yes, she'd apologized before, but it had been hollow and done to prevent a war and get him to help them, nothing more. She wouldn't have done it if not for that. Would she even really let go of things now? Could she? Tor hoped so. He really didn't need to keep revisiting all this stuff. It would be a relief when she left and he could just try to forget about her. They didn't have to be friends or anything silly like that.

For the next few days he didn't even try to leave his room. Just work. The King said there was a deadline, so what else could be done? He made of point of eating and drinking water and stretching daily while he did it, experience winning out over desire to get things done. He went running once early in the morning just as the sun rose, but didn't see many people. The rest of the time he just did what he did best, the only thing he did well at all practically.

Build.

Tor made a point of moving as close to not being aware of what he did as possible. It felt eerie and strange, he most often just sat down with a plan in mind and then came to holding the finished device or mass of copies. Time passed, but a lot less than he was used to. In three days he came up with thousands of amulets and several totally new devices. Luckily he'd already been working on this stuff or he wouldn't have gotten everything done by half. He'd had the plans ready to go. A few more he just didn't have time for too. Like a Not-flyer that didn't use hand controls and was guided by the mind. If that worked, he could try it with a flying device as well.

Then it was over suddenly, and he was supposed to stop. So he did. It felt wrong, like his body and mind were still moving, trying to capture something. Anything. At the same time he was still and solid inside. The feeling was like he was a stone in motion, only standing still...

It was night time when he finished, so he ate something in the kitchen, just some dark, slightly sour bread and soft white cheese he found in a cool box, hoping it wasn't someone's private stash of food. It should be fine, he figured, because the room was positively loaded

with supplies, enough for hundreds of people.

Then he went to bed, sleeping until midmorning, the sun coming through his window hit his eyes painfully. In a way he would have liked more sleep, and didn't really have anything to do, but that wasn't a reason to be lazy, was it? He had orders to relax and have fun, so he needed to get up and do it. Whatever that was. Fun? Kind of a vague set of orders.

Shaved, dressed in a light white outfit kind of like what they wore in Warden, except he had on a broad light yellow sash and soft white boots instead of sandals. In Ward the sashes all meant something. Red meant you were taken but friendly, married or something, but willing to dance and maybe do a bit more than just that. Green meant you were single and open minded, which was probably why every time he'd worn green down there guys had asked him to dance. Right. Well, there was no harm to it, none of them pressed him for more than that at least. Orange was rare and basically meant that a person wasn't announcing anything about themselves, so basically you were supposed to leave them alone, but then why go to a party if you felt like that? What yellow meant he didn't know for certain, but the people he'd seen wearing it always seemed to be having fun and have a lot of friends, so Tor had interpreted it as a party color. A person saying they wanted to have fun.

The dining room was big. The palace had bigger ones, but none really any grander. This looked like a jungle inside, complete with plants and blue sky. Not real of course, but it looked like a clearing in Ward, palm trees, big leafed plants of dark green and various other colors and sunny blue sky above. It was lovely. The floor had been made to look like slightly uneven dull gray stone, and the air wasn't humid, but it was a good approximation all told otherwise. As a plus there were no bugs in here.

There was one big table in it, with people sitting and eating casually. Some of the Warden people it looked like, women too, ones he didn't recognize immediately, so at least some of them had come from the palace. That was good, they'd probably be more at home with him and their other friends than the people at the palace, who would all be very proper with them, but still think of them as servants. Tor grinned at them and waved his hand a little to say hello. When they looked up everyone smiled, but didn't jump up or anything like that.

"Tor!" Called out a woman, easily in her forties, that he didn't really recognize.

"Come join us. We were just planning out our day. You want to be our native guide? Us ladies want to go shopping, but none of the guys are willing to stand around looking at things for hours. Maybe

take in the main market and get in trouble? It'll be fun!" All the women nodded and the guys laughed, probably thinking that it would be boring, but Tor had never actually been to the big market square in the Capital at all, so it could be interesting. It was supposed to be incredible.

One of the younger men shook his head.

"Nah, we should all go sailing on their little river. They turned the magic one on yesterday, so the waters not bad even. I don't know where we rent boats, but someone has to have something. It's water." Everyone just nodded in response. Obviously, in their world, if you had more than a puddle, you had a boat. Tor smiled.

Actually he did. A lot of them.

"That is not a problem at all, you can just borrow one of mine." They were new, based on a design he'd seen in a book back in Printer, about the size of one of the fishing boats, but sleeker looking, and decorated with bright colors that would glow at night. The crew could even change them at will. Whoever was driving at least.

He grabbed a bowl of oatmeal and a slice of bread that smelled fresh, so early bread, made that day. Feeling a little guilty about it, he put a half spoon of honey on the top and spread it around with the light tan focus stone paddle. It was a waste he knew, adding sweetener to the meal, but he did have orders to have fun from the King, and apparently the whole Council of Counts. Did that count? Eating sweet foods was supposed to be fun, right?

Tor didn't stand on ceremony, just placing his bowl and small plate next to the woman that had been speaking first. The woman next to her scooted out a bit to make room. Someone got him a chair and some fruit juice to go with his meal.

Everything got checked out with a poison snoop, but no one even blinked at it. Either so normal it was accepted or, more probably, so odd that no one had a clue what he was doing. Magical seasonings maybe? Or just a really funny looking salt shaker.

Tor didn't know if he could go to the markets with them, or even out on the water, it might be considered work. What he needed to do was find Rolph, and see what he had to say on the matter. It would also be fun if Nita was around.

He hadn't seen her in days, not since the attack. That kind of thing could put a person off, assassins coming for the person they're sitting next to, so she might just stay at the palace, figuring it as safer.

Then, she might be right.

It would be a shame, but he couldn't blame her if that was the case. After a while spent chatting everyone else moved off to start doing things, and not wanting to be the last one sitting around, he got up and did too.

Tor had absolutely no clue what he was up to. Boredom had already started to seep in around the edges and this was what, not even hour three yet?

Hurray. Vacation.

Chapter three

Being daring, Tor ventured out to the ice manufactory carrying amulets for two more of them, hoping that handing them off wouldn't be against the rules. This was harder than it seemed like it would be at first. Really, he hadn't realized how much he'd been working in all, having been thinking of work as only being building, or maybe copying. Most of the time planning would have been done at a time like this, or helping someone do something at least. When he got to the place people were loading their ice and Collette, wearing a light pink workman's tunic and a broad tan hat that looked to be made of grass, waved at him and looked excited.

Looking around, she hopped over, a literal bouncing movement and kissed him. Her lips touched his and she gasped.

"No shield? I can't work with ice and have one on, but is it safe for you? No one wants to kill me... Unless your sister Tamerlane is more jealous than she seemed? Didn't seem like it the one time we met." She gave him a look that wasn't exactly teasing, so Tor just chuckled and shook his head, black hair long enough to actually move a bit, even from the gentle shift of position.

"No, Terlee..." He stopped suddenly and tilted his head. "Honestly? I know for a fact she wouldn't harm you just for having dated, or even slept with, her future husband, but I don't know that she might not really be unhappy about it. She doesn't always talk about what she's thinking. Um... You might want to send her a letter or something, proclaiming the two of you friends? Then there will be no debts between you, including things like that."

"Wait, I just say, 'we're friends' and it magically means she can't be mad at me? I like that rule." The pretty blond smiled sweetly.

"We're friends, aren't we Tor? I know I think of you as a good friend."

Tor stuck out his tongue.

"Silly. But yes, of course we are. Only, it has to go both ways. You forgive people, but that doesn't mean you have to put up with them constantly trying to tear you down or anything. You have to be a real friend. Terlee really would be a good person for you to get to know though. She's quiet, but a good person."

"Alright then. I'll send a letter off to her. Know where she is? Two Bends or..." A small breeze caused the hat to shift, making her grab it without comment.

"I don't really know. What I'd do is take it to the Two Bends Fast delivery outpost around the wall and have Stewart just hand it off to the next delivery people through to take to her. It should get there."

“Done then. Kind of handy really. Would that work if I needed to get something to you, do you think?”

“Maybe? I need to let my family know where I am more, probably.”

“That doesn't explain the lack of a shield though, or that people keep trying to kill you.”

Tor shrugged.

It was as good a time as ever to try the field out, since she asked. He took her hand and kissed it gently, just to show he was really making contact. The whole time he looked right into her eyes, which made her blush prettily for some reason.

“OK.” He made his face go blank. “Now hit me.”

She hesitated, “What?”

“Shield test, hit me, like you really mean it.” Then he shut his eyes and let go of her hand in that order.

The shield engaged with the blow stopping her hand in the air about a quarter inch from his body. A decent uppercut to the stomach. Her field showed a lot more muscle under her work clothing and skin than it looked like. He opened one eye first and grinned.

Nodding, Tor turned it back off and asked her to try choking him instead. The shield turned back on before she could make contact. When he had her just stroke his neck nothing happened. A warm hand moved around his throat from behind, hard with calluses, but pretty when he looked down, a solid dark tan color, almost brown. Petra. Gently she started petting him, but then made to tighten around his throat in a sudden rush.

The shield wasn't fooled. It made a soft sound as her hands flew away.

“Damn! Ow!” Shaking her hands, she grinned. “Full shield too? Like your newest ones? How does it work?”

That was hard to explain really, so he didn't try to tell her the whole thing. How it actually linked to a person's own deep mind and used the information from that to tell if a threat was coming or not. Instead he just told her it responded to danger, even accidents, in case a person wasn't quick enough to turn it on or didn't remember to in a panic. That had happened too many times so far, and he'd almost lost people that way, including himself. This would help.

“Plus you can touch people now and actually enjoy a good party without acting like everyone's always going to try and get you. Ohhh, hence the yellow sash! Very daring and bold around here, with this many people. Um... I'd like to, if... you aren't too busy already? Collette can join us. Not now, later obviously, duty calls and this ice won't sell itself. As it is the line will be going back to the wall by noon. We just can't make it fast enough. Oh well.”

Glancing around for the King, Tor quickly shoved the two amulet sets at her earning a pleased expression and a hug. Then he asked her what she and Collette would be joining him for, even though he was up for almost anything. A yellow sash probably meant something more than he'd thought...

"Yellow sash... it means you're paying for the drinks!" She said brightly.

Oh. He could do that, he laughed and shook his head slightly.

"I thought for a second it was an invitation to group sex or something. I just put it on thinking that people wearing them always seemed like fun. Well, drinks on me then."

Collette heard that and hugged him from behind. A gentle kiss settled on his cheek.

"Oh? OK. I'm in. Pet?" The blond was obviously teasing him for his silliness. Petra joined in for a bit, then went to hook up the other two ice manufactories, an act which got cheers from the people waiting in the wagons. They had to load them by hand, and the person getting the ice was always hurried along by those behind them. Often loudly and with a little less than good cheer. Could a loader be come up with... no. That was work. Instead Tor shrugged and went over what Johanson, the finance counselor, had said to him the day before. Three days before he realized.

"We can hire people for that. Loading and deliveries? And lower the prices during festivals? It feels funny doing it, but I get the idea... more people will be able to buy it. We can just make more ice. I'm saving up for a house though right now. Maybe one of your magic ones? What do those run anyway, thirty-forty thousand gold?" Her voice sounded innocent, but not wheedling. After a second he got the idea anyway, she was trying to lower the price so he'd sell her one more cheaply. Shrewd bargaining. They were probably worth a lot more than that on the open market, but who had that kind of gold just laying around?

That made him blink. He stopped, and thought, and then blinked again.

"Um... Collette? You already own half the new magic houses... I have ten so five are yours or half the money from it if we ever sell them, whichever you want. I mean all of them, so if I make a thousand, half is yours and so on." She'd helped design it, which was important. Yes, building was his part, but he wouldn't have thought of most of it without her. He tried to explain that clearly.

"Just like how Major Godfrey has half the transports, or Petra half the magical clothes. But even if you didn't, say if Petra wants a house, or you want anything I make, all you have to do is ask. What's the point of having friends if you can't help them out every now and

then?" It made sense to Tor, but both of them seemed both excited and gave him strange looks at the same time. Not disbelieving, just... slightly shocked.

It kind of made him wonder what friend meant where they came from.

It was that way, three ice manufactories set up, three lines forming and both girls giving him an odd look, that the Prince finally found him, pulling up in one of the royal carriages. It would have been safer and more comfortable to travel using his Not-flyer, and several times faster what with all the early preparations for King's week going on, but then the two Royal Guards and the tall Princess wouldn't have been hidden from view as easily. Not that the Royal Guard cared about hiding themselves, just the fact that they had cargo with them.

What they called the royals when they traveled. Cargo. It was kind of telling as to how they thought of the nobles, wasn't it?

"Tor, you are not out here working are you? I'll tell my daddy and mommy on you if you are." In the bright light the red in Rolph's hair was almost back. Karina's too. It had been pure black a few weeks before, not even that long, but that didn't seem to have lasted. Maybe she should go bleach blond? That was holding out pretty well for Trice. Karina had gone to a red military bob and while a little young, looked like she could almost pass in the ranks now if she had too. Both wore black clothing, not military, but loose and soft looking with over long sleeves that had to be pushed up. It looked slightly uncomfortable, but if they were happy about it, why not?

Karina didn't look happy though.

Her face was still dark and down, her gaze barely lifted to his face and he doubted that anyone else was even visible to her except as a torso. Moving in he hugged her, expecting to hit shield and be shrugged off, but hitting soft fabric and lean girl, arms wrapping him tightly and not letting go. Well, a bit clingy and moody was better than standoffish and glaring.

A conversation started behind him about hypocrisy and how if he wasn't wearing a shield, why should Rolph have to. Stepping up behind him his big friend aimed a slap at the back of his head, triggering the shield and throwing Karina back. She didn't swear or call out, but it had to hurt. She glared at Rolph, while Petra explained happily and he turned the whole thing off again.

It turned out that the royal kids hadn't come to stay yet, just collect him, along with Wensa, who he gave an awkward hug to as well, Royal Guard or not. It got a smirk from the man she was with, but Wensa didn't respond to the humor of it. She wouldn't have batted an eye if he'd kissed her, Tor knew. Not because she wanted it, no, it

was just part of the training. That didn't mean the guards wouldn't make fun of each other or crack jokes though. Strange ones often involving violence or death, but they had a collective sense of humor, even Wensa.

Somewhere, in that possibly soulless husk she claimed as a body.

She looked a bit younger now, her gray hair a solid brown, her wrinkles smoothed with makeup. Not too much, but enough to make a difference. If she got out of the uniform she'd look almost human. It was an interesting affect, since he'd mainly seen her pretending to be an accounting instructor in grand Royal Guard tradition. That was, she'd actually become an accounting instructor and was one of the best the Lairdgren school had before Rolph left and she followed her charge back to the Capital. They weren't just scary fanatics, trained from near birth for their job, they were all smart too. Even the stupid ones at the gate that kept him out all those times. Of course even being brilliant didn't mean they couldn't be a pain in the rear if their work of the moment required it of them.

That was pretty much their job as far as he could tell.

The plan, after loading up on magical devices was to go around "visiting". It was a King's week tradition, you took snacks, small gifts, normally wine or spirits, and put people on the spot by showing up on their doorstep without warning. It was so you could set up private parties and assure your own invitations, or beg a place to stay if you didn't have one yet. It sounded... fun was the wrong word. Tiresome came to mind, but Tor didn't say that.

Traditions must be upheld, or what was the point of having them? Instead he kissed Petra and Collette on the cheek, and went with Rolph and Karina to his room and collect up some junk to hand out. He gave them each a bunch of new amulets. Normally that cheered the Princess up, but this time she just grunted.

Princesses didn't grunt. Titter and twitter, chuckle and if highly derisive, snort. But grunt? Especially when given one of her favorite things. Stuff. It was dismal to watch. Well, it was a lot of things for them all to play with later. No weapons and nothing that would hurt anything, except the boats, carriages and protective housing. Those could be a problem if set up in the wrong place or at the wrong time. It was an excuse to get a shield on Karina that she couldn't leave off, just hoping someone would kill her.

Tor waited until the Prince had his back turned and kissed her. It was incredibly inappropriate, but Tor had a hunch it might be taken as funny or playful. It was on the lips and well enough done she started responding, depressed or not. It got a smile from her, if a weak one. They were nearly halfway down the hall, a box full of things floating behind them, a large one too, in case they met up with more

people than they'd counted on, when Karina caught on to what he'd done.

"Hey!" She sounded outraged, but it was her funny, mock outrage, thankfully.

"You changed my clothes!"

From dismal black she now had on light mint green, and wore a skirt instead of flowing pants. The belt was gold and sparkly and her shoes weren't military boots, but delicate slippers that would have looked right at a palace function. It wasn't the change that was daring though, it was the fact that the green dress was very nearly transparent. Oh, it hid all the naughty bits well enough, thicker fabric there, but it looked good. Sexy. You could see her belly button, swell of breast and line of hip without straining even.

Rolph spun and looked at it.

"Oh, good, were off the black thing then? What should I change too then? I could match Tor's look, it's pretty unique or maybe-" Closing his eyes the Prince suddenly wore a nice tan cotton thing that looked stylish, with heavier lines of brocade down the front of the shirt, light blue in two stripes. It didn't have pants though, it just was gathered at the waist with a gold cord and hit mid thigh, on his feet were sandals that had dark leather straps and wooden bottoms. Karina finally broke into a grin and matched him but with brown stripes. It was a good enough look, if less sexy, so Tor followed suit, making his brocade stuff green. That seemed right, didn't it?

Important somehow.

The sandals on his feet felt funny to walk in and nearly made him stumble several times before he got the hang of it, but Karina took his hand as they walked out, so he wouldn't land on his face. At the bottom of the stairs she turned to him and kissed his cheek.

"Thank you. I know I'm being a pain. No one wants to be around a doom cloud all day. Thanks for being so nice. I didn't know that when Alphonse brought you home from school I'd be getting such a good friend too." Her voice sounded soft and subdued, but Karina tried for a smile. It failed pretty badly, but it was an actual attempt.

In the back of the carriage, which annoyed Tor more than a bit, being a bit cramped, with five people. Karina cuddled up to him closely enough that Rolph made a face at him. Then he relented with a huge sigh.

"Screw it. If you can keep a smile on her face for the next two weeks I'll glue the two of you together. Just make sure he has fun sis, or dad will have our behinds. And don't rub it in with Varley or it will be cruel. She really likes Tor, and now that they can't get married..."

Wait, Rolph knew that Varley was mildly upset over her plans changing, but could barely see massive depression in Karina? What

the heck was up with that? Karina nodded, murmured “of course” and laid her head on his shoulder, which couldn't have been comfortable given the angle.

Well... Tor could try to entertain her if it would help. She was nice enough and cute, if not as good looking as Varley. But looks were only one thing. Being a good person counted for a lot more. Varley was nice too, but that didn't mean she was a better person overall based on looks. It wasn't like such things were measured on a scale or something, each bit nudging you over others. Besides, she lied a lot, and manipulated. Being smart, she did it well too. That was hard for him to understand, it simply not being his way most of the time. He could lie, but mainly didn't bother. Who cared that much about what he thought anyway?

Something that Tor did notice was that he liked Karina a lot better now that she was pressing herself up against him. It was kind of shallow, but a real effect. Not just lust, he liked her more. Did that happen to everyone? Would he suddenly be friends with Maria if she was sitting there not Karina? All his life Tor had thought that friendship was a mental thing, not some physical mechanism, but what if it was both? Was love the same way? Did people love those they could touch and hold more than people they couldn't or weren't allowed too? It was an interesting idea.

When they got to the first place Tor felt like groaning and running away. If he'd been alone, he simply would have. It was Trice's parents place.

Wonderful.

Tor looked at Rolph and sighed, but his big friend just looked baffled. Was he claiming this wasn't pay back for Tor making him apologize to Maria? He'd seen Trice's mom after the Queen's day attack, but the last time he'd seen both Eric and Mercy, Tor had kind of been being a petty jerk, demanding back gifts because his feelings had been hurt by Trice. It was just stuff he'd made too, not anything valuable. His argument had ended when the war with Austras began, but he hadn't made amends at all. His palms sweat and heart started racing before they reached the door. Karina still cradled his arm and the case of gifts floated along behind them, like it was supposed to.

The door man was new, probably hired just for the holiday. Her parents were wealthy enough, but didn't live in the Capital all the time. Their house here was great though. It was real. Nice, but not some fake palace in miniature like most of the royals had here. Really, if he'd been picking what to make his own home look like, it would have been this. Only in a light purple. His house, his rules, and purple was his favorite color. The palace thing he had was nice too though, if over done.

Even he could tell that it would look horrible in any color but cream and gold. Making it all purple would be hideous.

Tor hit the sigil on the truth amulet, just tapping his chest on the outside of his clothing, nowhere near the amulet around his neck. It was the intent that did it, not the action. He knew what he meant, and it was enough. Anyone could do it if they bothered to focus a little. They smiled when they saw the glow, but looked slightly troubled.

Ah. They had no reason to know what it meant. It could be a weapon, shield, or just an amusement. He bowed low and then went to all fours lowering until his head touched the floor. It was hard to get the words to come out, because of his great embarrassment, but the words were all true. He'd been a jerk and took his pain out on innocent people. Tor couldn't ask for their forgiveness, because he hadn't earned it yet, but it had to be out there that he was sorry for it. Then he listed off how he'd been petty about mere things, and was wrong to have demanded it back at all. It was a gift and that meant it wasn't his to ask for.

Rolph explained the glow and what it meant, which got a murmur of appreciation from Eric. Taking him by the shoulders and hands they pulled him up and into a hug with back thumping from the Duke.

"Don't let that trouble you, it's forgotten already. Things were tense after all." He reassured the much smaller man. Karina nodded at him, apparently getting the idea that letting current anger make you act like a beast didn't help in the long run. The whole thing was embarrassing, but at least Rolph shouldn't feel alone now. He'd taken his turn too. If with a lot less crying and hitting. Then he hadn't told the Duke that he loved him either...

Looking up he saw Trice standing near the back of the room, her face blank and body tense. If she expected him to beg for her forgiveness on the floor she was going to have a wait. A very long wait indeed. He'd forgiven her mainly, and hadn't always treated her as well as he should when he was upset, but that didn't mean he wasn't mad at all. Maybe he'd like her better if they were touching? Walking to her slowly Tor grinned and hugged her. She melted into his arms and didn't move for a while.

"Something for you. "visiting gift"." Tor had it in the box for her just in case they met up. He held up the plain white disk with its single white light coming out of it making a blip the size and shape of a pea. It was on a heavy silver chain that had cost several golds. Chain was hard to make. The gold ones had cost even more.

"Thank you, it's lovely!" She said and had him help her put it on. An oversight on his part, she couldn't do that with one hand herself. Crap. He'd have to fix it on the next one.

"Does it do anything?" This came from Karina, who, if she was

worked up about him touching her cousin really wasn't letting it show.

Tor looked at Trice and nodded.

“Glittery hook. Part one. Give it a try?”

She hit the amulet, and her left arm was back. It was lumpy and didn't fit smoothly, and was too white. At first. It morphed as she looked at it, the feedback from her mind shaping it to what should be there, without conscious effort on her part. The lumps of protruding bone under flesh shifting and seeming to melt, the arm being more delicate than he'd thought. A minute later you couldn't tell she didn't just have her own two arms. Without hesitation she touched it with her other hand.

“It's soft... and warm! Mom feel!” She held it out and then turned it palm up and wiggled the fingers.

“I can move it! I can't feel it, but it's an arm! It's a real arm. You made me a real arm?” Tears started down her face, then Mercy's, Eric had a huge smile, being way too manly for tears in public.

“Wait!” Tor got everyone to stop with a single word. That was rare. Of course this was magic, and that was his thing. When he gave a warning there people actually listened. Sometimes.

“It should work and feel right, but there's no sense of touch yet. I can pass the sensations to the brain, but I haven't learned how to pick them up. Not just yet. So it's going to take visual feedback to make it work right for now. Kind of a hassle, really you should practice touching yourself before you touch anyone else with it, get used to what it takes to control it.” He nodded to her seriously, but everyone else laughed.

It was that funny that he couldn't make it feel yet? Or that lame. Well... He'd hoped to have it perfect for her by now, but this at least gave her something while she waited for him to figure out the rest of it. The joke went right past him until Trice ran over and kissed him hard.

“I'll do that, make sure to practice touching myself, before I do anyone else with it.” Her voice held her normal teasing quality.

Oh. Sex jokes. Well, it was still a good point. Keeping his face serious he looked at her skeptically.

“Um, what did you think I meant? You could tear something off with that thing you know...”

The smile came slowly even as he fought it. Then the laughter was louder.

They sat around and traded stories, got told off for trying to talk business by Rolph, who pointed out that Tor taking a break for two weeks was the first time in ten years that the entire Counsel of Counts and the entire royal family agreed on anything. Eric and Mercy

relented then, their looks suddenly worried, as if Tor might be ill or something.

When they left Trice wanted to come, so she got a clothing amulet and changed to match, her colored stripes being deep gray for some reason. No one else was dressed like they were, so they looked a bit odd to Tor, but no one in the city seemed to think it a bad thing. In fact people waved when they saw them, sometimes whistling or calling out until they waved back.

Not everyone, but the nobles all did, even stopping their shopping and errands to show their children and talk to them. What they were saying he couldn't tell, but the kids did things like clap and jump up and down. He finally got it when one young, but extremely tall, royal lady with a little boy next to her point and told her son who they were dressed like.

"Look! It's the ancients! That little one there is the Green man, the one that invented magic, remember the story daddy told you?"

The boy clapped and ran at Tor, giving him a big hug around the legs.

"Magic!" The little boy might have been three, but that was hard to tell, he bounced and clapped so happily that Tor gave him a little glow amulet on a hemp string that let him change the color of the air around him. The kid seemed pleased and it got applause from Rolph. The mother just looked at him wide eyed for a moment and then bowed deeply.

"Thank you sir." She said, her voice humble for some reason. The little boy bowed too.

"Tank you, Gween man." He said changing the colors on his amulet as the mother went wide eyed. She bowed again several times then. It was a bit awkward, but she gave Tor a hug too.

Karina smiled prettily, happy for the moment and leaned into him, Trice did too on the other side and whispered into his left ear as they moved down the street a little.

"Did you just hand a little kid a piece of magic that would probably market for several hundred golds?"

She wrinkled her nose at him.

"That kid's going to be fifty and telling everyone about the time he met the real Green man on the street!"

That got a laugh from Rolph who moved up next to his cousin and touched her new arm gently. Trice stared down at it and smiled, not getting his point. The Prince shrugged.

"All I can say on the matter Trice is that Tor isn't the Green man. You know that, Count Lairdgren is. What he'll end up being I don't know, but he's all him."

The Ducherina flexed her new hand and looked at it closely for a

second.

“Yeah. I guess I can see that.”

The carriage was ridiculously cramped and the only thing that made it bearable was that Trice and Karina took turns sitting in his lap. Sure, they were both bigger than he was, so he couldn't see anything, but that just meant he kept getting hit in the face with their breasts, since both sat with an arm around him, leaning onto Rolph as they did each time. He wasn't as enthused about it, but they were his relatives. Tor could get that.

Wensa and the male guard who didn't give a name both sat watching out the slits of windows on the other side. They got a whole side to themselves in case something happened and they had to move quickly. That they were better at doing that than he was, Tor didn't doubt. Pretty much everyone was. He was better at hiding though, he bet. He could wedge into little places these giants wouldn't even think to look in. Perfectly equal.

Yep.

When they finally got to Deбри house, over half an hour later. Sara's mom's place, which did indeed look like a miniature palace, and kind of funny for it, Tor felt the dread rise again and knew what was coming, so he just hopped out and went to. The last time he'd been there he hadn't just been a jerk, it was worse than that. Way worse. At this rate, he told them, he was going to end up spending his whole vacation on his knees apologizing to people.

He held up his hand and stuck out his tongue as the laughter started.

“I know, even I'm not so dense as to not get the joke there. Sigh. Even innocent comments get warped by you people don't they?”

Heather Deбри didn't make him grovel long, at least not alone. He hadn't said more than “I owe an apology for my actions” before she joined him on the floor, head next to his.

“As do I.”

His list, threatening to kill them all and destroy part of the city, then destroy her family's business, probably bankrupting them, kind of beat her having not paid him yet. Yes, the payment was late, six months or so, but he wasn't hurting for money. They weren't either, they even had the coin she informed him, but it was sitting aside in a secure vault somewhere else in the Capital.

“No big thing.” He had enough gold. Too much probably. If he had it that meant someone else wasn't using it. They needed to make more jobs. He started to ask about the idea, the woman looking suddenly interested. After all, investment in growth led to more income and that meant they could afford to hire more people. Plus it wasn't her gold, but if they could be a part of the whole effort, Deбри

House could still turn a profit. Tor suggested the focus stone idea Johanson had.

“Nope!” Rolph clapped his hand over Tor's mouth the instant he started to mention it. The move didn't trigger the shield at all. It was interesting to touch people again after all that time without, giving him a new perspective on things. One of them was that, as huge as the Prince was, he could move both quickly and with near total control. Tor normally felt like someone had tied fish to his feet.

The other thing was that more than anyone, Rolph was worried about him working too hard. Tor didn't work that hard though. No one could really. There were only twenty-four hours in a day and you had to sleep part of the time. Every few weeks at least. It was self-limiting that way.

The cool blond that walked in looked lovely, her skin golden and the cream dress she had on covered only part of one shoulder and barley hit her thighs. Still, she looked a little warm. Reaching out Tor realized she didn't have an equalizer on. Neither did Heather. From their sweat it wasn't cool in the room, so was it a comment on him? Well, he could have been a better friend he knew. Hence the knocking his head against the floor.

Head dropping in shame he swallowed. They'd rather suffer this heat than wear an amulet he'd given them? He felt like he should grovel more but Sara started yelling. Loud. It was a happy sound though.

“Trice! Your arm... how? Oh my god, is it.. does it..” Sara was on Trice like a magnet meeting it's pair. She touched the arm, screamed happily and started kissing it as Trice wiggled the fingers.

“Don't worry, it's magic, not flesh, but it feels real doesn't it? I can't feel with it yet, but Tor says that's coming. He made it for me. I should have known when he said he was making a “shiny hook” it would be something like this, shouldn't I?” Tears came into her eyes again.

Heather Debri froze, staring at the arm for at least a full minute while the girls celebrated. Then, slowly, she walked over to Trice and put her hand out as if to touch it. Trice reached out and took her hand, making the forty odd year old woman gasp. At first Tor feared her hand was being crushed, but that wasn't it at all.

“Patricia... Do you realize how much it would cost to purchase something like this?” Her voice sounding awed.

Trice smiled and shrugged, “More than I have on me?”

“More than the value of Noram probably.” Heather shook her head and regarded Tor with wide eyes.

“I'm... not certain I'm just saying that either. You couldn't afford to purchase a work like this. I don't think anyone in the world could. I

wouldn't have thought it was possible at all. Not even the King could get something like this for gold. Probably not even for a landed title." The woman kissed it herself and closed her eyes.

That got Tor to shrug.

"Right, well, you know, that just means that if someone needs one, and I have time to make it for them, they get it for free. I should eventually have devices for all the limbs, so if someone needs one, you can just send them to me for it? Or, you know, I can send some over to you and you can just distribute them to your shops and retail outlets to be given away to people that need them? If that's not..." Tor didn't know what it wasn't, but suddenly everyone in the room was bowing towards him. He bowed quickly, baffled. Heather walked over and gave him a hug, which made Tor a little uneasy. She was a bit older, but kind of hot. Also his friends mother.

"We can do that, Master Tor. Simply let us know what you'd have us do."

Then, of course, changing the topic without warning, Sara wanted to join their merry band of "visitors" and grabbed a rack of wine bottles for the purpose, but they couldn't fit everyone in the back of the golden wood and enameled cream of the royal carriage. Not without sitting on top of Royal Guards and Wensa rather politely informed them that wouldn't work. They needed the guards to be ready, not half smothered in young bodies as fun as that sounded. The other guy smiled and shook his head a little.

"Drawback of the job." He intoned, his voice deep, matching his size. The guy wasn't the biggest man Tor had ever seen, but had to weigh over three hundred pounds, all muscle. Wrapped around a core of death.

Which right now was chuckling at them a little.

Duh. Sometimes he was a moron. Tor sorted his amulets and found the carriage, a tiny disk of focus stone, white like the rest, with a glowing horse on it. Holding it at arm's length with his left hand a simple tap got the thing to appear.

It was purple on the lower half and deep blue on top, but otherwise it looked a lot like a regular carriage. A box on wheels, except as he touched the amulets sigil, which was held in the very nose of the vehicle, the whole thing stretched back, becoming longer, adding seats inside. Then he made the top transparent, leaving a solid shield in place, but making it look like a box open to the air. There were no wheels, because it didn't need them, it just floated about a foot from the ground.

Opening the door he waved everyone inside. Wensa didn't want to however, not trusting something new that she hadn't practiced in for years.

“We can't be trapped inside if something happens, we may react incorrectly or make an error that costs our charges lives.”

Tor nodded, he could understand that. New things were always a risk, even the ones he made. Touching the amulet again he made a second layer at the back, with an uncovered but comfortable seat. Raising them well above the street, the shape much more like the top seat some carriages would have for guards, something that Wensa had practiced with most of her life no doubt. Then he put in steps going up the side. It was all in purple now. That proved to be good enough for the woman, who wasn't just trying to be a pain it seemed.

Climbing in the driver's seat, directly in the middle of the front, Tor placed his hand on the controls. It worked like a Not-flyer really, except the purple rounded hand piece he grabbed hovered in the air on its own. It felt like smooth glass in his palm, finger wrapping around it easily. It could go about as fast as a military Not-flyer, most likely at least. Possibly faster actually, he hadn't tried the new “magic carriage”, but it had some extra features he wasn't telling anyone about yet. For now he went slow, not much faster than the carriage from before. Rolph called out to the driver to take that back to the palace, which was a bit of wisdom Tor lacked.

The man would have sat there waiting for them if no other instructions came. He may try to get food and water, but drivers had been known to wait days without leaving in a situation like that. It was something Tor needed to internalize instantly he knew. Protect your people, even from themselves. Check.

Driving the new magic carriage was pretty simply, as long as he didn't go too fast or get lazy and stop looking for people walking out into the street. Half the time it was like they didn't even see the rather large craft until they nearly walked into it. It was this level of attention to the outside world and the much better visibility he had compared to a real carriage that allowed him to see the girl walking towards the new craft before she noticed them. She didn't look very happy, a little miserable really, if Tor could judge such things from a distance, but she'd still hurt his friend, so she must pay.

What could he do though? Beating her up would be wrong, and just make him the bad guy, provided he won the fight, which he wasn't certain of by any means. There wasn't much time to think though... What would have bugged him after he'd broken up with Trice?

“Um, Sara? Quick... Start making out with Karina, um, drop your top or something... be as naughty as you legally can. Both of you look like your having fun, quick!” His voice was hurried and sounded stressed even to himself. It probably came across as a squeak in the back.

Whatever it sounded like, Sara didn't pause but half a second, took her top down and started kissing the Princess. Good kissing to, with enough passion to sell it as real most likely. Tor couldn't turn around to watch, but he saw the look on Lilli's face, and as they passed so did Karina. Tor heard a sudden gasp of air.

"Tor... that was brilliant! Use me and throw me away will you. Bitch... Not a week out and I'm riding in a magic vehicle no one has ever even heard of before, making out with a girl better looking than she is and have a smile on my face. See, I do have friends. Real ones. She couldn't even get a date before she met me hardly and only got her eye fixed because I know Tor."

That grumbling rant led to a longer one which made Tor wince. Their little group of girls was called "The Rabble" and seemed based on the personality of Lilli and her penchant for getting other people to do stupid and shallow things. Stealing from shops, having sex on dares and the emotional abuse of the other girls, even if they were a Princess. She offered love and warmth, as well as excitement, but it came at a cost. Obedience to an unstable bitch. For that love Karina had been collecting devices from Tor, which wasn't hard to do, and getting money from her parents, which was, honestly, more difficult to manage, since they asked questions when it came to golds, even a few coins. Karina had also performed more and more advanced sexual acts on the girl. They all had. They were really all Lilli's girlfriends, though a couple played with each other too sometimes, Karina informed them.

"Everyone stopped talking to me now though. Even Yardley and we were friends I thought. Special friends I mean. At least as close as Lilli and I were. So I don't know what's going on. She didn't look happy did she?" The tone to her voice wasn't gleeful or anything like that, just considering. Even when mad she was a decent person, Tor decided. Her little group had kind of been a bad influence. Especially Lilli, having all those girlfriends...

"Wait..." Tor looked back and swerved a little then locked his eyes on the road and tried to speak without sounding too panicked at having almost crashed.

"You can have more than one girlfriend?"

Sara giggled, her voice low and sultry.

"Sure, girlfriends, boyfriends, lovers. It's generally considered a bad idea to have more than six of each. Really it gets too hard to manage past about three in my experience. It can be done though. But if you're going to really go into it, you need to start keeping a schedule and have your calendar in order. Proper planning is key." She paused, her voice sounding like a smile touched her face.

"You have a bunch of girlfriends though, don't you? I don't know

about lovers...”

He did? News to him. Who? Petra? Yeah, she'd count. Ursala? Maybe.

Rolph tapped his shoulder and asked who he was sleeping with rather bluntly. Tor shook his head no. Not that his friend couldn't know, but wouldn't it be indiscreet to go blabbing it all around? Apparently it was a moot point because Trice filled them all in pretty accurately.

“Petra Ward, Collette Coltress and her sister Bonita who's really sweet, Countess Thorgood. I think that's it so far...”

Sara cleared her throat.

“Well...”

Everyone giggled and played for a while as Tor drove over to Tovey's house, Wensa, bless her, calling out the needed turns well in advance. Otherwise they would have gotten lost a dozen times. Then she said something really loud.

Tor missed the meaning the first time Wensa yelled it.

“Go to ground!” He stopped and everyone piled out fast, not knowing what was going on Tor waited for the vehicle to clear and turned it off.

People were staring off into the distance and a sound, like thunder came from some funny looking dots in the sky. Triangles. Five of them. They tore across the sky as fast as his eyes could follow. Kolb had said they were quick, but Tor had thought his flying rigs were at least close, half as good maybe, but no worse than that.

He was wrong.

So much so Tor couldn't believe it at first. These things ripped across the heavens sounding like they were tearing it in two, behind them they left white lines of smoke or something. Strips of cloud?

Before he could do more than stare like a moron the King's palace exploded. Streamers of smoke hit it and it turned to light and fire, with smoke in a dozen shades of gray. Did they have the shield up? Please let them have the shield up.

He chanted it almost like a talisman. What could he do? How could he fight those things? Men flew, pointing force lances and probably explosive weapons but nothing happened. The Austran craft were too fast and too far away to hit. Even the best marksman couldn't hit them from here. They needed a really big weapon. There was one that would work... but that one was in the palace, if the building was still there at all, around the neck of Squire Gerald, who, if he was inside the shield couldn't use it to fight, even if he did anything other than hide or run away.

They could run...

“Wensa, Not-flyers! Get them to safety... try Wildlands Station.

"I'll... I'll... try to stop them here..."

He needed a place where the view wouldn't be obstructed and searched the skyline for anything that might work. Using his flying rig to loft to the top of the clock tower, easily fifty feet up, Tor found a ledge and sat on it cross legged, closing his eyes. He knew the field, but didn't have time to build a device.

It had to be direct effect.

It was insane to think of doing it, but there was no time to debate the idea. The field had to be huge, and strong, and it had to work now. It could rip him apart, but that was what it was, right? Everybody died sometime. He'd just have to make sure he finished it first. Otherwise he'd be dying for nothing.

He closed his eyes, knowing what he was going to do and then focused. Going deep, into the bottom of himself, for a while the whole world was nothing. Then he just knew it was done. However long it had taken. That he was still alive was interesting.

Not that he'd complain.

When he opened his eyes the world was nearly silent, bits of smoke from four places in the sky trailed down to the ground and the last one flew away at what seemed like full speed, after half a minute, cheering started. He sat with his left hand held palm down in front of him, pointed at the sky, taking in the noise for a while.

When he got back to the ground everyone was still standing there, even Wensa. The magic case that looked like a trunk, but wasn't there, had followed him the whole time. It really was convenient, he thought as he checked what people had and then passed out the new shields and flying rigs to Wensa's companion, who didn't have one, but could use it. Wensa already had the newest stuff. He hadn't given it to her, but she pulled it out to show him. She'd probably taken it from his room.

We'll whatever. Tor decided not to worry over it and just nodded.

He didn't have to yell "to the palace" or anything stupid like that, everyone else already leaving for it. Every person in the city that could fly was already up in the air and moving towards it as fast as they could go and hundreds zipped in using Not-flyers, more running on foot. He flew hard, a snail's pace that didn't make them equal in the air at all to Austrá. The palace was on fire.

At least the smoke made it look like that. The buildings around it were gone, all those poor people too. Fires burned all over the place a complete and even circle around the shield. Which was still up. Right... they didn't know the Austran craft were gone. He didn't really know that either, they could have more, couldn't they? They'd have to signal the palace staff somehow when it was safe. For now it was better they didn't try to come out, because the fire could catch if it

wasn't damped first. They could lose the city at this rate.

Flying towards his house Tor thought about what he had at the moment. Water pumps that could reach up to ten miles and a nicely flowing river. It was a start. Air chokes too. He ran to his room and grabbed the stone plates and amulets. Reeling a bit at the door, suddenly dizzy. Awkward to hold in the hand, the pumping devices, since they weren't meant for that, but they'd serve. It was all he had.

He ran carrying all of them in a floating trunk outside. People called to him but he didn't understand them. Tor felt exhausted, more than he could handle, but the fire had to be fought, no lying down and napping now.

Slowly, fighting for each move, he laid the devices on the river bank and started passing the other end to anyone with flying gear. If he knew them, it didn't register. Not until Nita came up to get one too.

"Hey. I... we've a stop, fire in... go.. right." He thought the words were correct. They sounded like the ones he wanted. In a strange way at least. She pushed him down, tumbling with him. Why would she do that? Was she mad at him? Or... did he fall? How odd.

Well, he probably should have found her earlier. They were friends and she was a shy girl in a new place. It had really been rude of him not to consider her feelings first. Someone else was calling orders and people did what they said. Petra. That was right, she'd fought fires with this kind of gear before, with Karen and him in Ross, so she could tell them what to do. Good. He needed to sleep anyway.

But he couldn't. Fire. He tried to stand up, but since the sitting part didn't work, that seemed pretty ambitious at the moment. Even out of it he could tell he was mainly just kind of flopping around a bit. Nita was saying something. It didn't sound right though, warped and wobbly somehow.

"You're hurt. Stay still. Sleep or... I don't know. Stay with me. I won't leave you. I'll stay until you don't need me." The tone, the cadence, it was all really off. She could stay. That would be good. Tor had to fight that fire or people would be hurt though. He must have said that out loud, because she shushed him and started telling him what was going on, talking softly like she did. Barely audible. He liked her. She was nice, and fun.

That's where he'd had fun. He remembered now. Spending time with her, doing stuff in Warden. See Rolph, Tor thought, he could have a good time, and did. Hmph.

A giant came and carried him in. It would look ridiculous and he could walk, couldn't he? Count Ward took him up gently. Tor didn't like him much he decided. All the girls liked him though, and wanted to have his babies. They didn't like Tor. He was jealous of the man. Yeah, that was it. He got all the pretty girls and took them from Tor.

Varley and Ursala... and Maria.

The man shook his head.

“No Tor... you took them from me. Except Maria. She's mine still. Because you gave her back to me when no one else could. Now rest friend. The fire will be defeated and all will be well.”

Later someone fed him and made him drink water. It wasn't until the morning light hit his eyes that he really woke up. He felt weak, but everything seemed to be working fine otherwise. He started to pull himself out of bed when he noticed that Nita was sleeping next to him. Right, she'd told him she wouldn't leave. She looked... wonderful. Her face wasn't pretty and her body was nice but not the best in the world, and none of that mattered compared to who she was. It colored the way he saw her, that was clear, but she was his friend. That's what really counted.

He however, reeked. Horribly.

It wasn't the scent of fire or even sweat, but something worse, like something was dying. He felt fine, mainly, if tired still, so tried to wash it off in the shower. It worked, kind of, buried under the lavender soap, but he could still smell it. No mice would have died in the walls or anything, they didn't have spaces for rodents inside, being solid potential, not even energy. After a while he realized it was either him, or all around him like a cloud. It didn't get stronger, so he ran a tub and tried to soak it off. That's where Nita found him.

“Good morning! Everyone thought you might sleep for days, like when you're working, but here you are already. Would you like food brought up or anything?” She sounded happy enough to see him up and about. He'd just been more tired than he thought. That had to be it.

“Food is probably a good idea. Can you smell that though? Here.” He held his arm out for her, suddenly embarrassed, but she just took the arm and sniffed.

“Lavender? Water? Yummy Tor? What am I missing?” She wasn't just being polite, she really didn't smell it at all. The scent of death covered him, but... only in his mind?

Oh.

Wonderful.

In a way, it was, kind of, because he didn't want to smell like that, but it wasn't a great thing for him to have to put up with either.

He'd killed those Austran craft drivers tough. He may have had to, but he'd done it.

Himself alone.

Right. That would explain it. When you took a life, it tainted you, made you closer to death yourself. Everyone knew that. So he was smelling what he'd done? Or more like it, he was making himself

imagine that stench?

Fair enough.

If you kill it shouldn't be easy, should it? This was part of the price he had to pay, and eventually there would be more of one.

There always was. Actions had consequences, and killing someone was a big action. No matter who they were or why you did it.

He could have gone to breakfast, or had some of whatever meal was closest, but Nita wanted him to stay there and rest. So after remaking the bed, letting the sheets clean, he climbed in and lay there, looking at a ceiling he knew for a fact wasn't there. Food was brought on a nice wooden and metal tray, and was bland, either made that way or because he couldn't taste anything except rot. After that, Tor wanted to take a nap, but couldn't. He had work to do, vacation or not.

"The fire-" the words were worried not grumpy or rough at least.

"Is out. Some people were injured fighting it and in the bombing, but no one was killed from the attack itself. The area around the palace was already cleared, I guess because this could happen? So everything is fine and you're still on vacation. How fun! We should do something together, if you get the time. I know you're a busy man and all and may have other plans, so it's not problem for me if you can't. We're still having King's week I hear, to show the Austrans that we aren't afraid. Even if everyone is secretly terrified. I want to help with it, but I don't know what to do." She chattered merrily, not waiting for him to speak or really giving him a chance to at all. It was nice though, and reminded him a bit of being home in Two Bends. When thirteen people spoke all at once no one got heard, so you had to learn to wait.

Tor grinned.

"There's lot's to do for it, you can help me organize my stuff? And um, would you sleep in here, with me? It may be a little awkward when we have other people in for sex, but I'll deal if you will."

It was a throwaway line, Tor was trying to act all royal and sophisticated, but he ruined it with a smile, Nita didn't though, she lowered her head and gave a smile that definitely didn't ruin anything at all.

"I've never done that. Sex with more than one person. Maria has. She said it was fun, but complicated, and it really helps if you liked everyone involved. She does, like everyone, I mean, so not a huge issue for her. But I'd love to stay! Does that mean you're my boyfriend? It would be grand to tell father I finally caught a man I didn't have to pay and who wasn't being bribed to be nice to me by someone else." Her hand went to her mouth and eyes widened. She suddenly looked worried, though it was hard to tell why.

“Oh! I didn't mean... I'm not trying to pressure you or anything. I was just talking...” Her voice trailed off soft and embarrassed, but Tor nodded his head against the deliciously soft pillow.

So it was just Nita being shy again, that and not thinking she was good enough. Silly of her. Tor decided sleepily to correct that if he could.

“Oh, yes. Of course you're my girlfriend. Apparently I have several, however that works. Though it would be nice if people would let me in on things like that earlier. Like this. Thanks.” He was drifting off as they spoke, so he put his arms out for a hug and pulled her into bed with him, it was meant to be playful, but he really did fall asleep. Exhaustion just took him hard and didn't let go, wouldn't listen to his arguments and made him sleep for a while then. She was gone when he got back up, but then he didn't expect her to actually lay in his arms awake while he slept or anything like that. It would be uncomfortable and waste her time.

Tor got up and stretched, not really feeling stiff or anything, but knowing that collapsing due to... whatever it had been, wasn't normal for him. Dehydration? That had happened recently, and he really wasn't really drinking enough water. He'd been out all day and all he'd had was a bit of fruit juice that morning. Kind of a brilliant plan actually, not having any liquid like that. Thinking it a good point he went to the bath room and drank cool water from the tap. If anyone had managed to poison this, then he deserved to die. It was clean and crisp when it came out, filtered, and probably about as pure as it could get.

Normally he'd, well, he'd probably run off to the palace and then try to fix everything he could with magic, instead of letting people do some actual work and use their own ideas. Right now he should rest, but... well, other than sleep, which was simply done for now, what else could he do?

How about check on Petra and Collette, then on all his other friends? Petra had been leading the fire fighting, at least the flying pump portion of the events. Was she all right? He'd been sleeping and hadn't even thought to check! How selfish was that? Stupid sleep, always getting in his way every day like that.

It didn't take him long to find her at all, about ten seconds, because the dark and pretty girl was standing in the hallway, not ten feet from his door, nodding seriously at someone. A much smaller, incredible good looking looking dark haired man was saying something to her. It took a second for Tor to get who it was, as he was dressed in a plain brown and green canvas outfit and black boots, instead of the servants uniform or nice black or green jacket he'd seen him in most of the time before. His grandfather, Burks Lairdgren. A

sitting Count of all things.

“Petra! Are you all right, is everyone well?” His voice sounded scared and a little girlish, but they were all friends. They wouldn't mock him for it. Not too much at least.

“Tor love! You're up. Good. Bonita said you'd eaten and talked to her earlier, but she's not too sure if you're in your right mind yet. Everyone is fine, a few burns, a couple even major ones, but the healing devices did the trick, and everyone is fixed already. Most of the wall around the King's palace is gone, but we have crews rebuilding right now. The shield seems fine. It held perfectly of course. Do you need anything?” Her voice was kind and warm, Burks smiled.

The older man, who looked maybe thirty, if that, and was actually over three thousand, or so Tor had been told by the King, and no one had denied that it was simple truth, walked to him directly. The hand that came out wasn't there to shake, it touched his head in an annoying and invasive fashion, resting over his eyes, fingers wrapping the top of his head. Eyes closed, Burks looked at Petra and nodded. Or he would have been looking, it was a weird way to do things, but what could they say? When a person got to be an elder, over eighty in most places, they were to be revered, even if they were doing bothersome or annoying things.

Burks Lairdgren, his grandfather, had lapped eighty so many times it probably seemed like a joke to him if he bothered to think about it at all.

“His field pattern is badly degraded. Too much building with too little rest for far too long, I'd guess, then he ripped his field nearly into pieces using direct effect to create a blast that should have taken days to build for even the best, months more likely. He needs to rest and recover. I'm not really sure why he isn't dead to tell the truth.” The old man looked at him and nodded.

“Not trying to talk past you Tor, but Miss Ward here needs to know what to do with you. Right now that pretty much means anything but building or magic of any other sort. You know what it means to degrade your field! You should have been checking for it. Did you really think you could shape the world using your own information and never pay the price? The way you've been doing it?”

The man continued on for a long while, as Tor and Petra stood there. The meaning was clear, if Tor had to do something like that again soon, build a super-weapon out of thin air, it would kill him.

“Which would be annoying, and make your mother cry, so, how about you skip that one? Rest for a while and don't do anything too big.”

Looking at him Tor tilted his head.

“Um, how long?” He asked, wondering if he'd be able to get back to work in the next few weeks, when vacation was over.

“About twenty or thirty years.” The Ancient said firmly.

Chapter four

That hit hard.

Well, what could he do? Die or switch careers? The answer he wanted to give was simple, the most likely one a lot harder. If he switched jobs, the sensible course, he'd eventually get caught in a situation like the day before and end up killing himself, wouldn't he? Maybe it would be better to just save up now and go out doing something that might actually help people? He nodded gently his eyes going a bit dim. It was what he'd made his life, it was why people even thought he was a person really, instead of just a stereotype backwoods bumpkin.

"So no building at all then? For the rest of my life?" The words came out sounding sad and weak. A little helpless. Lost. So, the way he felt really.

That worked for him then.

Burks looked at him strangely, his body being held oddly still, "you can build. But no direct effect work for at least three months, and absolutely no massive things like you did today, for at least several decades. Impressive, but also unneeded and ultimately foolish. There were a hundred other ways for you to handle the situation, more than that probably. There always are. Magic is just one tool Tor. You have a good brain and aren't any more responsible for the world than the next man your age. No less either, but don't take on too much for yourself. It can lead to bad things and an early grave."

Tor wanted to go all "young buck" on the man and shout at him about how he didn't know what Tor felt or thought, or understand what it meant to be young anymore, but just couldn't come up with the will for it. After all "don't use yourself to death" sounded pretty reasonable to him really. The only problem was that Tor really did feel like he was responsible. For almost everyone and everything. That he had to help, no matter what. Didn't everyone?

Burks guided him back to his bedroom and shut the door on Petra, who'd been trying to follow them in, being part of the original conversation and all. It was a little rude, but what could he do about it? The man was old.

Sizing up the room, the vast window, the bed that would comfortably fit a dozen people and the writing desk in mahogany in the corner with matching chair Burks sighed. Grabbing the seat and settling in he waited. No gesture saying Tor should sit or indication he should do anything. Tor got on the bed and sat with his legs crossed. It was the position he took when he worked and one of the most comfortable for him, even if it generally wasn't considered polite in

company.

Finally the man spoke, his voice bland and almost flat.

"I should have come and spoken with you openly about what's going on. It wasn't an attempt to hide information from you, just collect the needed data and analyze your genetic structure first, to see what would be needed. My people grabbed a sample after you were poisoned, I think your mother mentioned that to you? What we found was... given everything, about what I expected. One small surprise, but for the most part you're genetically me." Burks gave him a wry grin.

"I know, how freaky is that?"

Tor raised his eyebrows at him and gave him a wry look back. If he was supposed to get the joke, then he'd missed something. Rather than ask a bunch of questions Tor nodded and just let words flow out, not knowing where they came from. That deep part of him that had been doing most of his work lately? Could be. All he knew was that he sounded far smarter than he felt at the moment.

"That makes sense. The field pattern that created the ancients has to be strong, doesn't it? It doesn't breed too often, almost never, but when it does it probably dominates, as far as traits go. It would have to in order to work at all, wouldn't it?" It did kind of make sense once he said it.

Burks smiled, a small thing that looked pleased rather than skeptical.

"Right! Genes, genetics, all that, it's a complete science, a field of study, but that is, essentially, what happens. A beings field pattern is what makes DNA, which if you ever get bored you should take a few years to learn about. I know you feel busy and rushed right now, but in fifty, maybe a hundred years you're going to start searching for things to keep you busy. Here's a hint right off the top that I had to spend centuries learning. Do stuff. Focus on the details and investigate to the very bottom of things. Then find the next thing to do. Strive to go beyond "good enough", or you'll get so bored you'll probably kill yourself. I've seen it happen with some of the others, even though genetically it's almost impossible for one of us to suicide. Not out of grief or despair at least. Not the ones that have lasted this long. But it's happened anyway."

Do things? It... made sense. Isn't that what he tried to do already? Keep busy, help people...

Burks shook his head, even though Tor hadn't said anything.

"Tor... as I said, in most ways we're essentially the same person. I know what you're probably thinking, and you're wrong. It's... part of you... of me, on the most fundamental level to try and help people, an essential part of our being if you will, designed to get us to serve and

protect others. To feel unease when people waste things, and to forgive even the most egregious of wounds and attacks. That's fine for the most part. You want to watch out for those situations where, even though it makes you feel horrible, you can't forgive people that will come after you over and over again, or those so truly insane they can't help themselves. That last is the biggest problem you know. People that don't know they're insane... It's not their fault, so how can you punish them by taking their life? But it will happen that you have to, even though it aches inside. You can't kill without a cost. Others can, but not you."

Ah. It made sense then. So the magic of the Ancients was what punished him for killing?

"Like that smell of death? After I killed those Austran fast craft drivers... I keep smelling rot and decay all the time. I don't even get used to it!" Tor shuddered. It was gross, and in his nose even as he spoke of it.

Burks nodded and told him that it was just like that. He'd also have horrible nightmares, sometimes see visions of the dead coming back and more.

"Don't let it get to you that much though. Sometimes you have to be willing to pay the cost in order to protect others. However I think I can help you with your current problem more than a bit. Those craft weren't piloted by people at all. Driven as you said. No one living was on board, so you didn't kill anyone. They're devices... very complicated ones called "computers", we don't use them here, it's part of the original charter... Well, I'll go over all that with you when the war is over. The thing is huge after all. Basically, for now, it comes down to you needing to stick to magic and not wasting resources... Like this palace of yours! It makes my skin crawl just to be in it. Do you know how many families you could have fed with the gold you used to build it?"

Tor laughed.

"About none?" He patted the bed forcefully. "All magic. Not even made on copper, just focus stone. That's really just compacted dirt, it makes a kind of rock. Fairly pretty, I'll show you some later. Even the energy cost is all in potential. It isn't really here at all, it just seems like it. It works though, so why not?"

That led to a discussion about what else he'd been making, Burks eyes getting wider the whole time finally he shook his head and buried his face in his hands.

"Well, that explains part of the problem then. Most likely." He heaved a sigh that felt familiar to Tor. He did that too didn't he? Did he really look like his grandfather? Probably not, since the Count was really good looking and he barely made average at best. This didn't

get said because the elder was talking. When old people talked you listened, it was a rule.

Probably one made up by the man in front of him, a long time ago, but it still counted, didn't it?

"Denno Brown never did get the concepts of magic at all. Good guy really, since he's basically us, he'd have to be, doesn't look much like you or I though. More like your friend Petra or her brothers. In looks closer to the old Indus cultures. Good looking people, don't you think? Anyway, inside he's like we are in some ways, the aging thing particularly. But his focus on science kind of narrows his world view a lot. Denno was created that way, a generation after mine. That's... I mean to say my, our template, was used to create his, about six years after I was born. He can't get that you're doing things like this without use of massive energy I bet. Probably thinks you're the great Unknown Factor come to destroy everything. I'd probably best send a letter explaining. You should too, if you don't want Larval assassins showing up every twenty years for the rest of your life. He's your brother after all, so don't feel too nervous about getting in touch with him."

The things Burks said were fascinating, riveting. Little bits and pieces of things about himself kept coming out as he spoke. Tor asked questions and made what he hoped were solid and insightful remarks. Most of them making his grandfather laugh after a while.

"Right. You're always at the bottom of every social endeavor. Everyone's life, honor and wealth is as important as yours or more so. You go to a state dinner and get sat at the Queen's hand and wonder why you aren't in servants green, and wouldn't blink to do it if they asked you to fill in? People call you Master Tor and you demure, because you know you haven't mastered anything yet? Women and men compliment your looks, and you just think they're being kind or even lying to make you feel better about yourself?" This time there were smiles, but no outward chuckles. He held out his right hand and nodded.

"OK. You won't believe this, but it's the simple truth and you need to know it in order to understand why other people respond to you like they do. Your genetic structure, your field, it's built so that you'll do all that, think of yourself last in any given situation. Which is good for the most part, meaning you won't get a swelled head or think that anyone owes you anything you haven't earned through hard work. But, and I know this will be impossible for you to believe right now, maybe ever, so just try to remember it academically for now, your looks are designed to put you in the top three percent of human attractiveness. Given the current world, that's closer to the top one percent really. Before the changes people held to a very high standard of beauty and there were a lot more people over all, so the pool was

bigger. That doesn't matter to the percentages directly of course. Perfect skin, hair, teeth and build. A bit thin right now, so eat, but you can't get fat biologically speaking. Not that you'd even be able to try, your nature won't let you waste that much food.

"You can't think you're all that bright either. I still don't think I am and I was raised with testing and daily evidence that proved otherwise. The fact is though, your nearly twice as intelligent as an average person, slightly more so. Your physical endurance is naturally about four times what a good athlete might have, though you need to stay active for that to really show as special. I recommend running about twenty miles four or five times a week, then triple that once or twice a month. Most couldn't handle that. You can. Your also going to work yourself to death eventually if you don't at least diversify your interests. Life is more than building. What are you good at? What do you like doing? Other than building."

Tor focused inside himself. It was a harder question than it sounded like on the surface. He could barely define fun and now someone wanted him to list what he liked? Simple, no doubt. Still, there had to be something.

"I like baking... I probably would have done that for a living if I didn't have so many brothers and sisters..."

Burks grimaced, "Right. You mother isn't exactly being... economical in the amount of children, is she? That's genetic for her too, I'm afraid. I'll talk about that whole thing later, nearly as interesting as our own situation I think. Probably more so given your sister... Go on."

What did he like? Building, Baking... nothing else came to mind, except sex. Tor blushed and looked down. Well, who didn't like that? He said it out loud, and got a single nod and a gesture that said to keep going on. Running? Well, he didn't like it, but he could see the use. Fighting? He wasn't good at it, but it wasn't boring. Painful most the time when he practiced, but never as bland as just running was.

"So, places to start, I recommend breaking your day up evenly among those for a while, look for other things to occupy your time too. I always found music diverting myself. It pays to keep up with what other people are doing as well. Trends and fashions, what people are concerned about. It may feel useless at first, or like a waste of time, but these factors shape societies. Also... and this will be hard for you, I know, but I can't stress it enough... Learn to let people do things for themselves. Don't give them bread or even create jobs for them. Let them do their own work and just help make it possible. You have to help. Yes. But you help people more by letting them be self sufficient in the long run. Letting someone become dependent on you is making them into a slave in a very real way, even if there are no

chains.”

The rest of what they talked about was interesting, but didn't shake his world nearly as much, he realized when it was all over. That he was designed to help protect the world was less mentally taxing than some of the other things that were said. He was smart? He got that he did all right with building, but actually intelligent in all areas? It seemed unlikely, but Burks assured him that all he had to do was apply himself and his mind wouldn't fail him.

In regards to appearance he had to shake his head and, rude or not he called Burks, his Ancient grandfather, a liar. Right to his face. He expected a beating for it, but that didn't come. Instead he was sat in front of a mirror and they talked about what made a person good looking. It was all there, but he didn't see it. He couldn't. It was just him.

Sighing the old man sat and... got young.

His face melted into a younger one over the course of minutes, until he finally looked about fourteen or so. Then he gestured up at the face.

“Good enough looking? Don't be polite about it, I can take your honest appraisal. I've looked like this for longer than Noram has been around, by nearly a thousand years. Go ahead, really look. Rip me apart, I won't be mad.”

The face was bare and clean shaven, attractive, nearly too pretty really, kind of girlish. It was the kind of face that all the girls at school talked about wanting in a man and gushed over, when they weren't discussing how much they loved all the massive and brutish combat giants. The skin was still pale, like his, but that just made him look better somehow, exotic. Almost everyone had darker skin than this. He didn't, but even his brothers and sisters did. His Mother didn't. Tiera his thirteen year old sister didn't, maybe a little, but those were the only ones he could think of, except his uncle Dan, who was like they were. So an Ancient trait?

The look wasn't like Count Ward, who was about the best looking man Tor had ever seen, but it was darn close in level, if totally different. Maybe even better looking? He spelled all this out to Lairdgren, hoping thousands of years really would give him some perspective.

Tor was calling him a bit feminine after all.

The man didn't say anything at all, just gave a grin that was slightly playful and lopsided, then pulled him back in front of the mirror. Not exactly in front of it, off to the side a little. The Count moved in front keeping Tor out of view.

“Now look, in the mirror, what do you see?”

Tor's reflection looked back at him. Only it wasn't his, it was

Lairdgren's.

Oh.

In the reflection the face suddenly looked plain and boring, maybe slightly homely. When Tor looked at Burks, it was the same face only much better looking. Just because it wasn't him?

"We're genetically the same person Tor. We think alike, we look alike, everything. Yes, there are differences in the pattern, the main one being the combat rage, which was a trait of the original Cordes. It must have slipped in from Douglas's genes somehow, or your grandmothers side of the family... No, it has to be from Douglas... I don't have the genes for that at all, no one else in the family does. Other than that we're closer than identical twins would be."

Oh.

Tor had to not think about it, because it scared him a little. Not that he was actually good looking, that was... nice. It would make things easier, wouldn't it? People liked good looking folk better. It was hard not to.

No it was that he still looked into the mirror and saw... a troll. Not literally, but when it was him, he knew the same face couldn't be more than average at best, even though on someone else it looked... fine. Excellent really. It was a face he could credit someone pretty like Petra actually wanting to spend time with, and not just doing it to be nice. Or even Collette. Or the Queen. The idea shook him more than a little. After all, they only liked him as a friend, right? They were fond of him, which was mainly because they were good people, not having anything to do with him at all...

The Ancient distracted him by growing older in front of his eyes, it was amazing.

"You probably can't do it yet, wait till you're about twenty-five or so, if I remember that correctly, and it will suddenly kick in. You'll just wake up one day and know. It won't be hard for you then. This..." He gestured to himself, now looking like he normally did.

"Is about the limit. I think the doctors that did the initial design were giving an eye towards vanity. Back then being old wasn't a good thing, not in Noram, so they left it out. Some of the others, Black and Red, can look older, and Red was designed to not be half as good looking as the rest of us, part of the program to allow for variety, since no one really knew what would work in the end. She can also shape shift into... well, it's something to see. If you ever get the chance you should ask her about it." He let his hands go wide and smiled, a thing that touched his eyes and turned into a look that seemed carefully crafted to get attention somehow.

"I don't bother to hide who or what I am any more. Most people don't concern themselves with it, to tell the truth. You'd think it would

be a big deal, but most adjust pretty well. Best to be open and just let people know if they ask. With you it should be even easier. You're the great Wizard Tor, so of course you won't age. Dan had problems with it though and I imagine your mother will. Well, we can just tell people that she's your mother. That could work."

Dan, of course looked different than he did. Good looking, but not the same as Burks. They just weren't as similar for some reason.

"Diversity is wonderful thing isn't it? He has the gene's, but he's just my son. A real, honest, got his mother pregnant, child of mine. Got my hair color too. You're closer to me than that. On the good side I can get you to take my place as Count in a few decades and no one will be the wiser as I go on some adventure or take up farming for a while. Growing things, now there's a good area for you to look into. I know I've always liked it. That's one of the things that never gets old. That's in our pattern too. Our line, mine and Denno Browns, it was originally meant to be a kind of super slave. Tractable without being dull witted. Willing to take on the hardest tasks without being forced into it. That kind of thing. That, isn't actually genetic. Not for the most part."

Taking a deep breath the Count shrugged and looked at Tor closely.

"I can go into it later, but a lot of these things are due to something else, something that's been passed to you, but not Dan, not Laurali either, thank goodness. They'll get to make up their own rules. Yours are more enforced, I'm afraid."

It was all almost too much, which Burks seemed to know, so they started talking about other things. Girls and what he had planned for his future.

The Count looked down and took another deep breath, "Ah... Well, um, kids. I know Ricky told you that you may have some problems having children if you married Veronica? Well, it's a little more complicated than that. You can't have them at all until you mature a bit. A few hundred years. About five hundred actually. Then it's hard. Until then... adopt. It's what I did. Still do mainly. On the good side you won't accidentally be dropping kids on women every time you have sex like Marvin Ward is. I'm going to have to have a discussion with him on the topic soon. He's here, right? Maybe I'll do it today or tomorrow. We should talk more too. Probably for a couple of years all told. I don't regret your Two Bends upbringing, but you've missed a lot you're going to need to know eventually. Still, we have time to get to it. If you have questions, just ask. I won't hide the answers from you."

"Oh! I have one then." This came out sounding a little bitter, but that was OK, he meant it that way.

“Who all do you have spying on me?” Tor waited for the man to flinch, wince or even laugh at him, but instead he shrugged. It was his shrug. Gah. It was eerie now that he knew to look for it. How did people not see this instantly? Probably the age thing really.

Burks was just older. So they couldn't be the same, right?

“They're all spying for me Tor. Even your mother, though she doesn't think of it that way. Ricky and Connie tell me everything. So all their spies are functionally mine. Probably yours too if you bother to work out how to get at the information. Most of it won't mean much to you, but do give it a go, will you? I'll gladly share responsibilities with you for Noram if you want. I know you don't want it, but I'll probably ask you to anyway. I haven't had a real vacation in about two thousand years you know. Not since Cordes died.” This got an abstract look and after a moment of silence that spoke of old memories.

“Even during peace time, some Duke is always screwing some barons wife or the wives get worked up because the men are doing each other, or a cow gets loose and crosses a border and gets turned into steak or some such. It's why I finally set up “the rules” you know. So that I didn't have to spend half my life dealing with everyone's poor dating habits. It's hard to ask royalty not to sleep around. Human nature really, people want to be loved and make contact with others. It only becomes a problem when the social rules prevent that from happening or make people feel guilty about it.”

Tor snorted at the man, which got a single raised eyebrow. Tor couldn't do it, but then he hadn't really practiced either.

“You made up the rules? Good, can you get me a copy? I have a book called “manners” but I don't think what's in there is complete. I keep missing things.”

Laughing they went to lunch in the dining room, filled with more people this time than last. Burks pushed food on him like a nervous granny, but then that wasn't too far from the truth, was it? In public they didn't talk about much at all, the weather and the rebuilding of the wall around the palace. How the Council of Counts wanted to cancel King's day because of the attack and the King responded by opening the royal coffers to pay for added celebrations. Or more technically was using Tor's money to do it. Burks had suggested it.

“I told them to just view it as the Lairdgren county special fund.” The man smirked at him using a look that Tor hoped he never had on his face, but feared was pretty common.

“Oh? That makes sense I guess. Well, Bonita and I will go over later to coordinate that stuff with them, if I'm paying for it. She's agreed to organize things for me, since I'm on “vacation” and not really allowed to work right now on anything. I... If I can't work for a

long time... what will the King say?" It was a serious question, something that had really bugged him, but Burks laughed and patted his shoulder gently.

"Don't worry about it. Just because you can't go ripping your pattern apart defeating the Austran forces with a thought, that doesn't mean you can't do anything of value. Just no building or copying for a few months, then keep to no more than one or two novel builds per month for a few years. That's still better than most of the top builders put together. Really, I'd like to see you go into greater detail and skill rather than the brute force you've been using. Your things work and I love the energy usage, but you're basically bludgeoning reality into the shape of your will instead of using finesse. Skill and working with what's around you. Just a suggestion, but... remember what we talked about earlier, about attention to detail? That's the path to true mastery in anything. Keep finding ways to improve and never stop."

Right.

Well, if he'd nearly killed himself doing it his current way, his way was wrong. So, more skill and finesse? Uhg. Tor had kind of thought he was getting a handle on that. Then again it was probably naive to think that an eighteen year old boy was approaching real mastery of anything. He nodded and started to think about how to improve, but Burks clapped him on the shoulder to snap him out of the deep state that was descending on him, hard enough that the blow never touched, his shield kicking in. It got his attention though. His grandfathers too.

"Oh, that's nifty. Turned on by itself? I'd like one of those if you have a spare."

Tor did, on him even, so he handed it over, then, as an afterthought went and got him one of everything he had. The man was family after all. Plus, he could make his own copies if he wanted them, for people back in Grenwyn. It was hard to remember, but the man had actually invented the whole system of magic they used.

They found Bonita sitting in a room with Maria Ward and Trice, sewing, of all things. Cross stitch, from the look of the wooden squares being used. Terlee like it and would sit in the evenings after chores doing almost exactly what they were.

He'd have to see if she was in town visiting Tovey. They were getting married soon, so it wouldn't be surprising. She might even be pregnant already. She didn't have the Ancient patterns like he did... then his mother certainly didn't have any trouble having children, did she? He'd check. After all, she was spying on him, only fair to spy back. If he didn't she'd probably think he didn't love her any more.

Bonita shot to her feet and grabbed him as soon as he walked through the door. It was followed by a kiss that was a little awkward,

but warm enough. Right, her family was watching. Burks was his family, but he'd known the guy less than a year, even if they did look alike when Burks wanted to bother. Tor took her hand and not letting go went over and kissed Trice just as warmly. Trice was better at kissing, using just the right amount of tongue and artful nibbles.

He focused on it for a second, trying to get what was being done exactly. Attention to detail. Finally she pulled away and gave him a doe eyed look that he wondered at. Was it real or all part of an act. He didn't dare even try to read her yet, his pattern was just too fragile. Once pointed out he could feel it. Kind of an "oops" moment, not realizing that before.

The stink of death had faded though, so the day was looking up. The Austran craft were run by complex devices? Amazing. For a second he wondered if that could be built using magic. It would be interesting to try, once he was healthy again.

"So. I've come to collect my girlfriends up and take them off visiting to the palace. If you want to come? I kind of need Bonita though right now, since she's agreed to help with the celebration plans. We need to coordinate with the palace people, whoever is in charge of that. I know that the Queen would love to catch up with Trice and her cousins would too..." Tor looked at Maria who was hanging her head a little, a humble look that he wasn't used to seeing on her. Was he being rude leaving her out? Probably.

Did he care?

Searching his inner self he realized he did.

Crud. It really made it hard to stay mad if you actually cared about everyone, didn't it? At least now he could blame some old time "scientists" for messing him up. Not that it would help.

Jerks. Tor had to fight a smile at the thought.

"Maria? Would you like to come along? Maybe Marvin would like to go as well? I know things are tense there, but if your both willing to knock your heads on the floor and grovel a bit... well, sooner done, the less likely to get me killed later, yes? That's how that saying goes isn't it?" The phrasing was awkward, but she smiled and him and stood.

"I'll collect the Count. At this rate I'm going to get calluses." Her delicate hand went to her forehead.

Tor's went to his own in sympathy.

"At least we'll go to the parties with the same decorations then. I've been doing my share of head thumping too, the last few days."

The ride over was quick and silent, Tor using his magical carriage, which Burks had him re-color to look like a royal coach in fine golden wood and enameled cream, perfectly smooth and rather stately. It did look classier that way, if not as fun. Next time, Tor

decided, he'd take it out in bright pink and purple, just to see if anyone noticed. On the ride over he sat in the very lead seat, being the driver. The Wards took the middle section with Burks sitting between Trice and Bonita, chatting them both up so expertly that Tor wondered if they'd run off with him for the evening.

He even had Nita laughing loudly, her hand going over her mouth for about half the ride. Well... The idea of losing the girl's company wasn't fun, but if she was going to be happier spending time with Burks, he could only encourage it. She deserved to be happy.

At the gate, the guard bowed to Count Lairdgren, Bonita, Trice, then did a double take, eyes going wide and did the same for the Wards. Looking at Tor the young guard gave a half wave.

"Hey Tor." He said casually.

"Hi, Chet." He replied with his own wave, happy that he remembered the guys name at all. He still mainly remembered him threatening to break his legs when he'd been sent away nearly a year ago to the day. One or two more days, he realized.

They still had to wait for someone to come out and vouch for them, which the Wards bristled at but Tor openly supported, given the latest attack.

"Any good looking tall people could claim to be the Wards. And any pale short guys could claim to be us. Trice is supposed to have one arm and I don't know how often Bonita has been here at all. I don't think I'd let us all in without swearing to who we were with truth devices on." Which he had one of on him. To his surprise so did Trice.

"What? I went into your box of stuff and got extra. You always said too if we needed or wanted anything. If you changed the rules, that isn't my fault. Dead useful and since I have my own groveling to do as soon as I work up the nerve, I'll need it." She glowed cream and gold the whole time, smiling.

Tor shrugged. "Good. I hope you got whatever else you needed? It's a pain, always handing things out. I should just put a box out in the foyer and leave a note. Would that work? I hate making people feel like they're obligated to me. It's off-putting. That way people could just take what they need and we could all avoid that annoying part where they "borrow" things without telling me about it. I think I'll do that."

No answer came because Varley floated over using her Not-flyer. Before she could speak, before even moving past the safety of the gate, or out of public view, Count Ward climbed out, a little stiffly, then lowered himself to the ground. Not kneeling, not just bowing, laying flat on his stomach, dark suit on stone drive, head turned to the left, face on the drive, hands straight out to the front. Then he began to

apologize as abjectly as Tor had ever heard anyone manage. If it wasn't genuine he didn't know what was.

Trice gave a wicked little grin and reached out dropping her Truth amulet on his back. It stayed pure the whole time.

Tor blinked.

As the Count listed how he'd failed and wronged the Princess it never even flickered. Ouch. That had to cost his ego more than a bit. Varley stared, crossed her arms and finally sighed dramatically.

"Guess I should call off that kill squad then." She looked at the Royal Guard and gestured at them all. "I recognize everyone except for this lady..." The look she gave Nita was curious.

Tor slipped the brown hemp string of his own truth device over her head and asked her to affirm who she was, her intent, and if she had any ulterior motives in coming. It was soft, mumbled and forced Varley to strain to hear, but her word, with the device on, was accepted as proof.

Chet looked at the devices and simply asked if it was possible to get some for the palace given everything, "It would certainly make things safer, don't you think, Tor?"

It was a good idea, but Tor didn't want to lose his right now, or Trice's, in case the Wards needed them later, or they did. Trice pulled off two more and handed them to the man. Tor promised he'd send a full batch over later, so that all the gates would have them. The guard bowed to Trice again and winked at Tor knowingly. What he knew, that was beyond what Tor could fathom, but he seemed pleased and satisfied, so he let them through. Bowing the whole time.

Maria hmphed as they passed, getting Trice to ask her what was wrong.

"Patricia! Didn't you see that guard? He treated Tor like... I don't know, just some servant or delivery person! No bowing at all, just a wave and using his name like they were millers together or something. I... Tor saved us all! He protected the whole city and it hurt him to do it. Marvin told me how he had to carry him in after the attack and how he looked half dead. Plus he's a Countier and a Master Builder. We should report him and have him removed for insubordination. Or... or lashed!" She sounded serious.

That would be foolish though.

The man knowing him by name was a good thing. It meant fewer beatings most likely, and if he ever accidentally got left off a list or something he'd be more likely to at least check on it instead of making Tor wonder around the city, lost and alone.

Burks spoke softly from the back seat.

"Countess Ward... The man wasn't being insubordinate. He was simply treating Tor as he would one of his own were they to come

through the gate. He probably didn't even realize he was doing it, to tell the truth. It wasn't meant to be an insult, but the highest compliment a Royal Guard has. He was treating Tor as part of his family. Probably because he unconsciously views what Tor has done as marking him as one of them. The protectors. It's part of the training, conditioning them to look at the royal family, and all of us, as children, to be protected from harm even at the cost of their own lives. Chet there was responding to Tor as he would a real adult, not someone to coddle. Don't take offense at the rest though, being thought of as a child, or if you must, blame me, since I came up with the program to train them originally."

Whether that explanation sufficed or not with the blond Countess he couldn't tell, trying to focus on his driving of the low craft as he was. Varley was gliding right alongside, admiring it openly, and Tor really didn't want to bump her, even at low speeds. She had a shield on, but who knew what would happen to the baby if she was shaken around too much?

They were ushered directly in to see the King and Queen, who looked tense and drawn, Rolph who looked nearly as bad and Karina who looked glum again.

She was back to wearing black, this time a long plain dress that made her thin body look like a stick, instead of a cute Princess. Tor gave out hugs all around and shook the King's hand, getting almost everyone else to follow suit. Which was funny in a way, since half of them didn't do it right at all, not being their custom. The Wards asked for the truth devices again and groveled for a few minutes until Varley pronounced herself satisfied again. For her part at least. There would, no doubt, be more groveling needed because of the stupid declaration of war.

Everyone else kind of had to let it go then, since she was the most wronged party in the room. It would take more than just a few apologies, no doubt, but it was a start.

There was a lot of discussion about safety and continued air attacks, but Burks shook his head with a small half smile on his lips.

"There are rules that Denno Brown adheres too. Three pods of Larvals at any given time, and it takes at least fifteen years for them to develop, and be trained enough to be a real threat. Before then good guards can beat them, if with effort. The drones... I think you're safe for now, honestly. When Tor took out the four he did that probably reduced the Austran air force by about ten percent. Even though he can't do it again, the Austrans don't know that. They won't risk it." The voice had the confidence of long age behind it, but no one felt any better.

"He can't? I think you sell our Tor short sir." The Queen said, not

coldly, but not exactly sounding kind either.

Burks explained the whole thing with the pattern and how massive and repeated trauma's to it could lead to dissolution. No one at the table got it, except the Prince, who goggled at his friend.

"Crap! You nearly died protecting us? And if you do it again, for decades, you just die? Tor! You can't do that, we need you! I..." The Prince didn't finish the words, just letting them trail off.

Karina nodded.

"Yeah Tor. We can find some other way to protect ourselves. For your part, arm yourself better and make sure you don't need to do stupidly heroic things like that anymore. I'd rather have these new shields for all of us than you destroying yourself in one moment. I don't know how we stop them if they come again but—"

Well that was obvious at least.

"Squires Gerald and Gemma. I was a bit surprised they didn't take out the ones the other day really. Probably trapped inside the shield? That can be fixed though, if something like it is about to happen again." Tor looked at the King who seemed baffled for a moment and then nodded.

"I'll see they're given what they need for the task. Very good. Well, I think that will protect us from the air at least. I'd forgotten how very able our Squires are these days. I for one feel much better now that I'm reminded, don't you dear?"

The Queen laughed eloquently.

"Of course! I'd been told, but I didn't think about them at the time! Yes, they'll do nicely. Thank you Tor." Her smile was real, he thought. If she wasn't acting to make everyone else feel safer. Either way it was good to see and better than the drawn and pinched look of a few moments prior.

That left the planning for the celebration which was way more complex than he'd ever imagined. The Queen was in charge of it, and ran the whole thing like a battle campaign. Karina was her general, now that things had shifted about with the attack and they'd gone almost wild compared to what they normally planned.

As he'd been warned, the funds for it were coming from Tor's personal account in the royal treasury. The Special County Lairdgren Fund. It was more gold than he thought really existed, but he nodded anyway. It was only gold and if it got to the public, then all to the good. Everyone but Burks gave him a funny look when he said it though. The King acted like he'd just admitted lifting his purse, and the Queen blushed at him, but made solid eye contact and smiled prettily.

"I have some devices I made for it too. I don't know if it's going to really help, but it's something..." He listed everything off that he had

planned. Which got appreciative murmurs from the room.

Rolph suggested that they give people rides in the magic carriages, and bring in some air transports, maybe even for free trips to other cities to spread the cheer. It would reassure everyone to see that they had aircraft too. That was a new thing, and Noram had kind of lived in terror of what Austrā could do to them from above. Now the field was more even. Austrā attacked and for the first time in history, Noram responded by simply destroying their craft. That had only happened before once. Back when Cordes ruled. He'd taken a single craft out much like Tor had.

Only while in a combat rage.

"But showing people that we have flight capability too, that should help people rest at night." Burks assured them all, with that maddening little smirk he had.

They'd have to borrow some transports from the military, but it should be doable. That or get the new public ones in for a few days.

Humorously enough Burks suggested a "ducking booth", a contraption that no one else had ever even heard of. The idea was to put someone, say a high ranking noble or two, up on a high platform, then let people throw heavy balls at a triggering device that dumped them into water below if they hit hard enough. For extra fun they could put small chunks of ice in the water so that it would be really cold and give the sitters funny costumes to wear the whole time. They could put nobles on it and people would flock to the event, the Ancient assured them.

Tor thought it sound like a fun idea himself, and agreed with Burks plan of charging a penny for three throws, and then donating the money to families left in need by the war. Who wouldn't want to dump a giant in freezing water? People would be pooling their funds together for the chance. It was probably as close as anyone would ever get to taking some of their own back from the royals that looked down on them, wasn't it? Tor put in that he might just slip some of the partiers some extra coin, just so more could have a turn. No one else loved the idea, since they were the giants in question, but grudgingly Count Ward agreed to sit the bench as a form of penance for his foolish declaration of war.

"I can't apologize to every person wronged, but perhaps those that hear of my being humbled will accept it as a sign of true intent?" He didn't look pleased about it, but Tor nodded to him anyway.

To real people, back in the villages at least, that probably would work pretty well. It would have for him, if he'd heard of it as a child.

The man kept surprising Tor with his contrition and humility. He was supposed to be a jerk that was easy to hate and got all your girls pregnant, not a nice guy that... got all your girls pregnant. That was

still there.

To his surprise Karina volunteered to do it herself.

The Queen started to speak about it not being dignified, but then grinned.

“Then again, it does no real harm for the citizens of Noram to see us as people too. Very well. That's two. I won't be doing it myself, but I may deign to lobe a few of these balls if the right person is up there. Who else is doing it? Burks?” She made her face so innocent that it had to be practiced in front of a mirror.

“Of course. I'll volunteer Tor too. Who doesn't want a chance to humble the mighty wizard? It will show them that they don't need to fear him. We should leave the King and heir off, too close to treason, even if in sport. Hmmm.” He pointed rudely at Countess Ward. It was a single finger stabbing at her directly, an aggressive move that seemed nearly angry for the normally calm man.

The voice was relaxed though. Smooth.

“Wear something shear and white and men will line up to see you get wet. I... don't mean that precisely as it sounds... That too though, if you can manage it.” He chuckled at her as she turned red.

The tone wasn't biting, but somehow it hit home in a way Tor didn't understand at all. He got all the meanings of “get wet” now, but hadn't thought that the idea of doing either would have bothered the girl. It seemed like something she'd have enjoyed really. Except maybe the ice water. No one could like that. The idea made Tor shiver a bit already.

Then it was becoming clear that his idea of Maria as an evil bitch that destroyed innocent young men for no reason might not be the whole story. She was far from perfect, a bit vain, shallow, too free with her favors maybe. Maybe not, given royal society, he didn't know. She was said to be indiscreet, but so far Tor hadn't really seen it, except with Trice. And she was her girlfriend right?

Stopping, Tor blushed, it must have been a deep scarlet. He'd referred to Trice as his girlfriend earlier. After he kissed her. That kind of put the focus of the words on her at the time, hadn't it? Ooops. Well, if it bothered her, he'd hear about it, probably in a restaurant while she told the world how ugly and stupid he was, and how he kissed like a dog. How short and childlike as well. Since those were even true mainly, he couldn't argue the points. Only, he wasn't ugly.

Burks had said he needed to remember that, but it was just so hard to believe.

No one noticed thank goodness and he got his face under control when Karina suggested some games. Just little things, like a ring toss and sheet pulling races. Tor had to ask what that was, being new to him, but the idea was simple enough. A team of four people pulled a

fifth while they sat on a bed sheet, pulling them along the ground, racing against all other teams. Each team that won got a prize. Normally chilled fruit. It was a picnic game. It sounded like a good prize though. Who didn't like chilled fruit?

They went on like that for a while, with Nita taking notes the whole time, and making diagrams, for placement of events and a calendar of when things would take place. They only had a single day left to prepare, and vendors, entertainers and set-up still had to be gotten going.

When they got ready to leave Tor boldly asked if he could steal Karina for the night, so that planning could be done without contacting the Queen every ten minutes. It made sense even, and the Princess looked so happy about it that permission was given without discussion.

So... work to do or not, Karina had been moping? Well, it made sense. Tor had been downcast a lot longer than a few days himself after Trice, and what had happened to Karina was at least as bad. Worse. Tor had kind of suspected that the "engagement" had been a ploy the whole time. Karina had really thought that Lilli loved her. If anyone could get what she was experiencing it would be him, but that didn't mean the depth of pain would be the same.

The first thing they did was organize all the devices Tor had for the celebration and tried to find people to run the events. Most the Ward people jumped at the chance, even though they wouldn't get as much free time to wonder around or play themselves.

One of the women, the one that he'd talked to about shopping a few days before hugged him a little with one arm.

"Tor... you saved our lives. Twice. If you need something done, I don't think anyone here would blink about it. Plus, big celebrations are only fun if some people work part of the time, the more people taking turns the more everyone gets to relax. Don't worry about that, none of us will forget to take our turn too." Her smile was dazzling in her dark face. If she wasn't great looking, she still had her charms, pleasant demeanor being the first one he noticed.

Taking his cue from her he smiled and thanked them all, and since most of them didn't shake hands at a rule, he started handing out hugs instead. It was awkward feeling, but everyone patted him on the back or said a little something friendly. He tried to do the same, even though he suspected he wasn't doing it right. No one said anything about how moronic he sounded and kept smiling, so he went with it.

That's what he was doing when Collette and Petra came in, both walking with a slightly older dark skinned man, the guy with the cold ice drinks from Warden, Tor couldn't remember his name if he'd ever

known it.

Or could he?

If he just focused on remembering and dropped into a trance, it shouldn't hurt his field at all. Literally speaking he was strengthening it, concentrating on a part of himself. That made sense, and reminded him not to slack off on meditation. It really should help him rebuild his own field faster. The idea surprised him a bit, but he decided to try it. After a few moments the name came to him.

"Hi Morgan." Tor hoped he'd gotten the name right. The man smiled big and said hello, but called him "Master Tor, sir". Sticking out his tongue Tor said they should all just call him Tor, since it was his name and he definitely wasn't a master of anything yet. Everyone laughed, but Petra pushed Morgan forward a bit more. He was holding a tray of drinks, several different kinds in focus stone cups. They were mainly ice by the look.

"I'd thought to sell my wares at the King's week festival here, and wanted to get permission. Counserina Ward and Baronetta Coltrass both said it would be all right, but since I want to set up in your front yard to avoid ground rental fees..." He passed out the drinks, which Tor checked openly for poison first. The one Tor got didn't even have alcohol, but the others all did. They were even better than the ones from Ward, except there was none of the pineapple and coconut drinks. The red berry mix he had in front of him was good though. Bonita had something yellow and tart smelling, with waves of alcohol fumes wafting off and Trice had a drink that was a brilliant green. Karina had two, and suggested that they give them away for free. Morgan blanched, but Tor nodded, taking her meaning.

"Let's do food too. Morgan, what will it cost? You won't lose money, probably make a lot more. I'll just cover it for everyone so a lot more people will probably have them. I'll pay in advance, so you can get supplies. Can you work up something in purple and gold too?" Richard's birthday, so his colors.

Nita made notes and Tor suggested a cold box for the ice to be kept in, using a freezing unit. He wanted to make a miniature snow box that would keep the cold in and make enough for all the drinks constantly, but even thinking about it was stupid, since it might just kill him at the moment if he tried. Instead Morgan and his helpers would use a metal blade rubbed back and forth to shave the ice. It worked and Tor knew it was better that way, letting other people do for themselves, plus the helpers got paid, so he kept his mouth shut and mentioned nothing.

He did give Bonita a box of gold to pay for everything she needed to, having Collette get it for them. It was just a few hundred gold, five hundred. He told her to just get more if it was needed.

That... earned him a funny look from the room, but she hugged him. Tor didn't get why people reacted to that. If she was his second in command for this, why shouldn't she handle the money? If he'd had a wife, she'd have done that for him surely, right? And she was one of his girlfriends. They'd both said so. That meant it was real.

Maria smiled at him then, looked down and back up at him. Now, over a year after the first time he'd seen her do it he understood what it meant. She was flirting with him. Him? The Troll of Galasia? The one she accused of all sorts of perversions and vile things, not the least of which had been trying to force her to have sex against her will, when they'd only ever even talked once, and that being mainly her attacking him verbally? Why? Did she have some plan in mind? Some game or trick to make him look stupid or some new way to hurt him? Sure, she'd apologized, but she'd also admitted that she didn't mean it at the time. Not totally, just because his flower arrangement had been too good. Pretending not to see he looked away and started going into the food arrangements.

They had some kitchen staff, but no other servants, which was fine with him really, the house mainly took care of itself after all, so when a knock came on the front door Tor jumped up and walked quickly to get it himself. The door was just outside the main dining room, the smaller of the two, but they didn't have to feed hundreds of people yet so it made sense to use that one, right?

It took him about a minute to get to the door, and on opening it he saw two older people that looked only vaguely familiar at all. He searched his mind and figured it out. It took another trance really, the data being a little obscure.

The very first royal party he'd gone too, the people being announced just ahead of him. The Duke Brettermere and his Duchess. They'd never spoken or anything. Well, perhaps they'd come visiting? They had luggage with them, a good ways back on the porch. Ah. Looking for a place to stay, but not wanting to presume anything?

"Look everyone! It's the Brettermeres!"

A small cheer went up behind him as the older couple smiled nervously.

Chapter five

If the Duke and his wife were expecting a cool or grudging reception they didn't get it.

Instead Tor just made sure they planned to stay, and started trying to move their luggage himself, which had six strong men following him without asking, doing most of the real work. Collette jumped up and played hostess, leading the band of people to a room on the second floor. It was marked with a bright yellow compass rose, each door had a design, but Collette closed her eyes and touched the door, a few seconds later in very good hand writing and large black letters it said "Brettermere" on it.

The door opened and both the royals froze.

"Oh my! What a lovely room! I," The Duchess looked down and then straightened, making a bit of a wry face. "Howard and I have had a standing invitation to stay at the palace, and have since before Richard took the crown. More than once he's led us to our room himself, as a Prince. This year we arrived only to be sent away. We thought... well, we are rather of a different generation than the Queen and thought perhaps we'd been put to pasture when she sent us off here. We didn't realize it was an honor. I think I might have been a little cold to the dear, I'll need to send her a note first thing. This is splendid!"

The Brettermeres were both even more impressed after being show around and how to use everything and the Countess pulled out paper and pen to start her letter to the Queen right then. On that note the rest of them left, planning to get back to work.

Before everyone had no more than sat down another knock came at the door. This time a sitting Baroness and her husband, with their kids tagging along behind them. Three of them. In the back stood a good looking and familiar face. Beaming.

"Ridley?" Tor started, looking at the young man that Tor thought he recognized from school, but Trice practically tackled the guy and started kissing in a way that looked more than a little friendly. Everyone looked on for a second without comment. People had friends after all, so no one thought anything of it.

Trice kept an arm around him, which started to make Tor jealous, but he let it go. The guy had actually defended him to Trice when she was going off on him in that restaurant. Yes, under the King's orders, but Ridley probably hadn't known that at the time and may not now. If they were lovers or something, then it had to be harder, rather than easier, to go against what she'd been saying, but he'd actively defended Tor anyway. It was hard to dislike someone that did things

like that, wasn't it?

"Mom, Dad... this is him. Tor." If he'd defended him before, his voice was positively deferential now. No reverent.

So, really awkward.

Before he could move three people were hugging him. The move was a bit familial for strangers, but whatever. A lot of people in the Capital were like that. It seemed nice enough at least. They didn't let go for a long time, but moved out of the way to let two more people hug him. One was a little girl who might have been seven or eight, and next to her was a good looking boy of about fifteen or so that hugged him too, if in a manful fashion with a lot of back pounding which Tor returned in kind. There was luggage so he suggested they get a room and then they could all visit at leisure. The Baron straightened, blinked for a few seconds and smiled hugely.

"Why... thank you! We figured on hitting the relatives then all the inns if we had to, but this is much easier. Nicer too."

They got rooms, plural, three of them, next to the Brettermers. Ridley and his brother flipped a copper to see who got to share with their little sister, since it meant more babysitting duty. The younger boy won, but did so with good grace and a promise not to make Ridley do all the work. The little girl crossed her arms then and shook her head.

"Right, like it's not me having to look after you two..."

Tor nodded to her seriously, "they do look like a handful."

"Tell me about it. Well, what can I do? It's my lot in life, I guess." She spread her hands and shrugged.

No one laughed at the interplay, but everyone's face held a smile. Even the girl's.

Then, finally, they managed a whole half hour without knocking. The next group that came was Kolb and almost all of his people, who at least didn't expect hugs and cuddles. Mostly. Petra had to hand out a few and Tor got pounded on the back by a couple of the men. They got their own section of rooms, though they had to share, royals or not. Collette expected things to fill up fast after that, since people would have seen them all flying in and "Tor's Palace" was lit up on the outside, meaning easy to see as it got darker.

That made him try to convince everyone to call it a "Not-Palace" but that just made everyone laugh and Collette suggest they get ready, instead of playing with words.

"Brace yourselves, this is going to get busy, very soon, I think."

She was right of course. Everything moved quickly, almost non-stop. It became almost a game, trying to sit before the next group came. They had to set watches to handle getting everyone a room that night. For some reason Tor wasn't on it, but that was all right. He just

kept greeting people until his eyes got heavy, then went to bed. With his field so damaged and depleted, it was normal for him to feel more tired than usual, wasn't it? Kind of what it meant really, as far as physical signs.

If it ever got really bad though, he wouldn't just die. That would be too normal. No falling apart would be the way it would happen, bits and chunks of him raining down as they fought to stay together but couldn't. Something Tor decided to avoid if possible.

It would make the floor a mess if nothing else.

Eyes closed as he hit the pillow, naked but under the covers, the soft feel of satin against his flesh. When he'd first seen it Tor had thought of silk, not knowing any other shiny materials really existed. Collette explained it to him, so that the pattern could be repeated at need. It felt better on the skin she assured him.

It was certainly pleasant enough. Sleep took him anyway, and dreams, most of them about building, what he wanted to do, and how he needed to pace himself. They showed this by letting him try to build something simple, a light, or a flyer, things he'd done a thousand times, ten thousand or more really, and then start falling apart in bloody gobs. A few let him finish and then just fade, kind of like a ghost in an old story. He got the message he assured the deeper parts of himself as he fought to the surface, and he wouldn't be a complete moron if he could help it.

Something tickled his mind as he woke. Rousing him.

There was... pleasant activity at his groin and the sheets moved in a familiar pattern, gently up and down. When he looked to his left Nita was watching him, her eyes mischievous.

"We thought we'd surprise you. I hope you don't mind? She didn't think that you'd let her do it if you knew first..." She looked almost scared for some reason.

God, it wasn't Maria was it? That sent a chill down his spine, which perversely made the warmth below feel even nicer. Or... no, she'd definitely said she, so not some guy. Well. It did feel nice whoever was doing it, but just in case she was right, and Tor wouldn't normally allow it, he needed to check and stop it if need be, hard as that would be to do. Carefully, almost afraid of who it could be, his mind coming up with a dozen women that would be off putting, Duchess Brettermere for instance, or Ridley's little sister. Agh! No Bonita wouldn't have allowed that, it couldn't be anyone too bad. One of the women from Ward?

It took him a second to get it when he saw the face, still a little puffy with sleep, her mouth and face distorted a little as she worked up and down on him.

Karina.

Oh.

Her eyes went wide, but he laid back and let her keep working. Karina was all right, he decided. Once she finished, swallowing without hesitation, she moved up his body and kissed him.

“Sorry, it was driving me crazy all night, trying to sleep next to you like that and not doing anything. I know that I’m-” Whatever she was going to say it got drowned out in kisses, then knowing he needed to brush his teeth before doing too much of that, he worked down her body and returned the favor. She squirmed nicely and giggled just before the moaning came.

“Oh... Ah!” It was a pretty sound.

Looking over, after Karina was done, he realized they’d left out Nita. Tor decided to blame sleep deprivation and started working on her in a similar fashion, a little shocked to find Karina pushing him out of the way after half a minute or so. Playfully he took her place and then, awkwardly and with a little laughter they both moved their mouths into place. Taking turns.

Was that group sex? It was interesting. Not any better than the regular kind, but fun in its own way. Kind of like saying; look, all these people find me attractive enough. Good enough. Of course if one of the girls brought a man to bed that would be harder for him. Could he get away without touching the guy? Was that considered rude? For some reasons he doubted that was in “Manners”.

They all took turns cleaning up, but when his turn came, after he shaved and brushed his teeth, Karina boldly led a charge on the bath chamber, Bonita giggling behind her. They just bathed though, so he got a good look at Karina nude for the first time. She was thin and hard looking, with slightly defined abs, and high, tight breasts, red hair or not, her nipples were a lovely shade of tan, a lot darker than her skin. Bonita had slightly larger breasts, and a softer body, but was closer to what Tor thought of as “just right” that way. Still, both were more than worth looking at. Or doing things with. That they were both willing to with him was humbling.

“That was fun! You’re both way better than Lilli ever was. I do wonder what’s going on with her. I mean, I shouldn’t care, but I’m curious. I don’t know why. Probably because I want to make her hurt, for hurting me, but I don’t know, maybe it was a good thing? I realize now that I can actually have real friends and I don’t have to buy their love. Kolb’s people are here, maybe I should have some of them look into it?” She grinned, a little evilly.

That, Tor knew, could be bad.

Lilli was a bitch that hurt his friend, and he didn’t wish her well, but she didn’t deserve to die over it. Getting the “secret group” in on it would probably end up poorly for Lilli, unless Karina was very

specific. No, they'd be best to poke around themselves he told her quickly, trying to make sure the Princess's bad relationship didn't turn into assassination. That worked anyway, because Tor was headed to the bakery later anyway to try and buy up all the product he could at bulk rates. It was close enough to the areas that Lilli haunted to be useful to them.

Karina nodded when she heard the idea, looking a little scared. What if Lilli was happy and everything was brilliant and shiny for her? That would be worse than not knowing right now. The pain was a little too sharp still and the idea poured off her face, even if he couldn't read her field at the moment. He figured that Karina would just have him go check or might even give up the idea all together because of that fear.

Instead she grabbed her Not-flyer, all her other gear and several weapons that Tor hadn't known she had at all, including an explosive weapon that even the military didn't use yet. Not the big one, it's much smaller slightly older brother, but Kolb had described that as the most dangerous weapon he'd ever even heard of before Tor had foolishly made the bigger one. He pointed at it and she nodded somberly.

"Dad insisted, we all have one, even mom. The new shields too. She's bad about wearing them, because she likes to touch people, but she has to. Your new field makes it easier. I think she forgets it's anything but a pretty pendant from you. Dad had it put on a really fine gold chain for her, so she'd remember him too." The thin redhead smoothed the front of her outfit and made direct eye contact with the other woman.

"Nita, you don't seem the jealous type, but my mom is totally into Tor. You should know that, because she'll go all evil Queen on you if you hurt him. Just a warning. She wouldn't hurt you for it, I don't think, not physically, but I wouldn't count on ever going to another social function again, or anyone showing up at yours, if she has to come after you. She's pretty much the kingdom's expert at social combat."

Wide eyed and soberly, Bonita nodded, "I won't. I promise."

Tor would have liked it if they could all go, but Nita informed him that she actually had work to do and couldn't go off just then.

"Do you think you could go and visit my father though? You could take him some hand pies. Only the one bakery carries them, but it's a King's week tradition and near the house. I know it might seem odd..." She suddenly looked at him with that shy look she got sometimes, as if it would be some huge imposition.

It made sense with that visiting thing, didn't it, to take a gift?

"He likes the iced raisin and apple doesn't he?" Tor mentioned

casually, trying to make sure he remembered correctly.

“That's right, how did you know that? Are you... using magic? I though you weren't supposed to yet...” Her voice was worried so he kissed her as a distraction. It seemed to reassure her a lot most of the time. People in general liked contact, but Nita was a special case, wanting it more than most. Was it because she was a little insecure for some reason?

“Silly. I don't want to die. Not that reading a field is that big of a deal, I mean, you're doing it right now, and so is Karina. Most people do it all the time on some level, they just aren't aware of it. I just worked part of the festival at Debbie's last year and Collette requested them for him, that's all. I don't think he and I have ever even met. Should I go without you though? I don't want him to think...” What? Tor didn't have any more to say, but Nita nodded and filled in what she thought he'd been saying.

“That I'm just a laborer for you here, instead of your girlfriend. But if both of you go and tell him that I managed to actually get some attention without having to pay for it, he'll stop worrying about me some small bit. Maybe. Even if I don't get married, I can show him I'm not alone any more. At least for now.” The words were firm, sharper than anything that Tor had heard before from the woman, so he gave her a solid nod.

“Then we'll follow your suggestion and take him some hand pies if we have to make them ourselves.” Well, he knew how, and come to that Karina had helped him make some before. An actual palace baking emergency when a kitchen had caught on fire.

Gerald and Gemma had set it on fire come to think of it...

Well, they'd done well with the super-weapon so far, so it probably wasn't a problem. It wasn't like they'd done it on purpose, just accidentally dropped a large pot of oil that caught fire, that was all.

They didn't talk on the way over, Karina seeming subdued, but lovely. Before they walked in Tor kissed her hard, enough to get her attention, so she took a deep breath. One that caught a little in her chest as if really worried or even scared suddenly.

“Alright Tor. Let's do it. If we have to fight, start with force lances, we can work up from there.” The order was at once military and absurd, but Tor showed her the white and multicolored glowing thing he kept in a small pouch on his hip. The top of the bag got left open slightly for easy retrieval. As weapons went it was powerful enough. Lilli wouldn't survive it most likely.

“Ready.”

Inside the bakery was busy, but not slammed yet, being the day before the actual celebration began. The little device shop next door

was active too, busier really, with a half dozen tall people walking around and a few well dressed kids doing the same thing. One, a teenage boy, about way too old not to know better, grabbed something from a display and tried to run out. Karina reacted instantly, her left leg flashing out across the tender shin, tripping him painfully, because her shield had engaged and took him about like an iron bar would have, since she was the one in motion. The new fields did that.

All the kid was bringing to the experience was soft and fragile flesh and a bunch of pain. She didn't move at all either, when the legs hit, all the force on her dispersing harmlessly into the floor with a pop. Force lance suddenly in hand and pointed at the chest of the boy on the floor, she spoke softly.

"If you have a ball of lint in your hand I suggest you show me now. I'd hate to use an explosive weapon in here over nothing. Let's see it... now." Her voice was sing song and light, not even mean overly. When the boy, larger than she was by half a foot opened his hand a small glowing white piece with a simple sigil in red on it.

Tor nodded.

"It's a restroom."

The boy must really have to go bad, Tor realized, since the penalty for stealing something that expensive would be a lot worse than the humiliation of wet pants. Plus, the shop had a restroom, and Debbie would have let him use it if asked. She was nice like that.

Tor slipped a truth device on the boy, he'd taken to wearing several over the last days. For some reason when one person needed one, several often seemed to at the same time. Then they questioned the kid, who tried to lie first thing, of course, which made sense, having been caught with the stolen device in his hand. He wasn't stupid though, after the third wrong answer and black aura streaking out of nowhere he cringed and just started telling the truth. Karina nodded encouragingly, still holding a weapon on him. It wasn't as dangerous as she'd claimed, but could still kill him, not having a shield or armor on.

"So... I got into town three days ago and went walking, because I was bored... and met this girl, Lilli? She has One brown eye and one green, it's exotic. She said so several times. Anyway she's good looking enough and I don't exactly have a lot of friends here, right? She told me that she'd get her friends to, you know, spend time with me, if I got her something from here. She didn't say what it had to be, just something. I didn't know what it was, it was just closest the door. God, don't tell my parents! Just... dump my body somewhere or... send me off to a mine! I'm strong, I can work hard, and I promise I won't run away or anything. I give my word."

Odd thing was, he was telling the truth. His offer to go to a mine for forced labor willingly was an honest one. How bad were his parents if dying or a life of hard labor and an early death were honestly preferable?

“How about this, if you’re willing to die anyway, I’ll give you this device... no, wait...” Tor looked at the display and picked out a bed and a decorative light display. Girls liked pretty things, especially shallow ones that weren’t too bright, like Lilli. He traded the restroom out and explained what he was doing.

“These, they’re probably more what would tickle her, don’t you think Kari?”

Karina blinked, then nodded.

“Yeah. That would do it. All you have to do is help us catch her setting up thefts. I mean, she’s really doing it, and corrupting a nice boy like you, who did you say you were?”

“Um, Jerral Derring. Countier Fourth. Third now... my sister died...”

“Karen.” Tor fought the grief from his voice, but not all of it left. She’d been his friend, they fought the fire in Ross together, he missed her and it showed enough Jerral’s eyes went big as he nodded. “So you’re Davies brother? Well, as half your punishment we’re turning you over to him for the week then. He’s in town. Expect a few beatings. Can’t save you there, and you know, you kind of deserve it. This was about the dumbest thing I’ve heard of in months. Still, is it a deal? You may even get some sex out of it. If so, have fun. Meet us back here in the morning, if she tries to send you again or if you find out about her sending someone else, not just here, but to any shop or... anything really. Deal? No parents involved at all, if that’s what you want.” It was, it turned out, a deal. This boy was truly afraid of Count Derring.

The one time Tor had met the man he hadn’t been wild about him either, but it was a stressful day, so Tor had decided to cut the man a little slack. This... Well it didn’t say anything good about the guy at all, did it? The boy left, but promised to do what they asked, in exchange for some beatings from his brother, and a chance to not have the guards called. Tor took back the Truth device and sent the boy to collect his reward. He wondered if he’d actually get anything for it?

Box came out of the back room holding a tray of delicious smelling hand pies and set them on the display rack, smiling hugely when he saw Tor and Karina.

“Hey! Well, as I figured, my little friend dried up and blew away about the time she figured out I wouldn’t steal from my sister for a bit of tail. Well, plenty of fish, and it’s King’s week. If you can’t get laid

then, when can you..." He looked at Karina and winked.

"Begging your pardon for the language miss... unless you're interested? In that case I'm-"

That earned him a slap on the arm from his sister who'd walked up behind him, "You! Keep that up and you'll drive off half the female customers. Word gets around you know, the Capital isn't that big. Tor, I wish I had you back as my assistant this week. This one's a dog, and only half decent as a baker. Say... care for a job?" She laughed at her own words, but Tor nodded.

"Yes. Kari here too. She has no real experience, but she'll work hard and won't complain. Oh, and we both work for free, so that's a plus. We'll even take the morning shift? We both have duties later in the day and we may not be able to make it each morning, but..."

Debbie clapped and Box looked pleased rather than put out. Maybe he thought he could score with "Kari" if she was going to be around? The man wasn't bad looking, so maybe he could? It was worth it for him to try, as Tor could now attest. If nothing else it gave him something to look at other than his sisters customers.

Debbie sold them the hand pies for Bonita's father, trying to give them to him, but he wouldn't hear about it. After all, it was a business and besides he wanted to buy all the things he could from her possible for the King's week celebration, which meant increasing production greatly. Box both liked and didn't like that when he realized what it meant.

"Ahg, never getting laid again, am I? That schedule won't even leave time for a professional girl... Well, I'll live. Done without before a time or two. Or six. Hundred? Six hundred? That sounds about right. See you both tomorrow?" Worried about getting some or not, the decent looking man eyed "Kari" pretty intensely then.

Speculatively.

It was just on the verge of creepy to Tor, but that might just be jealousy. Karina seemed pleased enough at the lingering glance, didn't she?

As they walked out, strolling so they could talk without calling attention, a dozen hand pies in a nice covered basket they'd bought across the street from Debbie's, Karina turned on him.

"So, working in a bakery is our cover, so we won't be noticed?"

"No... that's just for fun. I'm on vacation, remember? This way we can spend time co-opting all your old friends against Lilli and then turn her over to the King personally for leading a theft ring and coercing people into it. I mean without it being work, directly. That's obvious, right? I mean, you wouldn't be doing it, except for fun, or as a lark at least, right? So your dad will have to agree that I'm not doing anything too work adjacent?" It was kind of a real point, if a bit of a

trick. Not that the King wouldn't know, but he might let it slide.

Tor kept talking, working through it all on the fly.

"He'll... probably go easier on her than we would, not wanting to punish her just for hurting your feelings, but it's a real crime and she does kind of have to pay for it. I could look the other way if it was just me, but if she's stealing from Debbie, who else is she doing it to? Besides, this is all new information and you're not part of her group now in any way, so we don't have to mention anything you did back when. Really we should try to get the others out too if we can. It sounds like they weren't any more guilty than you were."

That got a nod and a guilty look at the ground. She'd done her share of things she wasn't too proud of she murmured. Then she told him that she hadn't been able to get in touch with the others at all, but then, while she knew where they lived, for the most part everything had always gone through Lilli, so short of visiting, she didn't know what to do. The answer seemed easy to him.

Visit.

It might be hard on Karina, he warned, if they were truly on Lilli's team still and had decided to hate her now, but it would give them a chance to get out from under the ax before it fell if they were clever enough to take the chance.

The walk only had one turn, and Tor had been there before, once, so ten minutes later they were at the Baron Coltress' door, gifts in hand and smiling, the older man had light blond hair shot with silver and still managed to look stately and somehow younger than he should with a twenty-seven year old daughter. He was a good looking man, which probably explained all his attractive daughters.

"Hi!" Tor offered brightly. "Bonita sent us, with gifts? We're, um seeing her? She couldn't get away today, working with the Queen on the enhanced celebration thing, but she thought you might like to meet us?" His voice was a question the whole time and made the man frown and shake his head for some reason.

"Why won't you people leave my daughter alone? She's a good girl! She deserves to be treated with respect, and not made fun of by noble snobs and brats that have too much coin and not half enough sense for their own good. Tell me what they paid you to set up this... whatever this game is your playing, and I'll give you double to go away and leave my baby be. Triple if you'll tell me who paid you first!"

The man was close to being enraged, almost growling, except that he was sad too. It made Tor wonder what people had been doing to his Bonita? If her own father had this kind of reaction to them...well, it couldn't be friendly could it. Karina stepped forward just slightly and bowed a tiny bit.

“I don't know if you'll remember me? I had a different haircut then, and my hair was more red, the dye is wearing off so you can see the color? Anyway, I'm Princess Karina Cordes and this man is Torrance Baker, you know, the Wizard Tor? I suppose he could do magic tricks and I could stand around looking regal if you don't believe us, but Nita really is seeing us both, so we kind of need to prove the point to you I think.” Her voice held good humor even though the greeting had been more than a little harsh and off putting.

Tor took it as a father doing his job and protecting his child, as was correct, even if he didn't know why exactly, but didn't expect Karina to act that way. It seemed that once again she was more than a little full of surprises.

Six amulets later the man relented, and decided that they were who they said, since actors wouldn't have access to that many magical devices all at once and making a magical carriage and house appear one after the other in the front yard was a bit telling, especially since you couldn't even buy the carriages anywhere yet. He'd seen Tor before apparently, but the hair hadn't been so long. Tor brushed it back so it wasn't in his face. Laughing Karina tied it back with a truth amulet on a hemp string, wrapping it into a pony tail. The man bowed then and smiled.

“Ooh, hand pies? The right ones too! You must be a wizard then, well come in. So both of you are seeing Bonita? That's a bit of a shock.” The man didn't sound pleased to be saying it, but didn't hesitate either.

Tor tilted his head slightly and watched the man for a bit as he looked into the covered basket again. Giants did like to eat, as a rule.

“We are, and she's been staying with me at my house. Um. She has her own room there though. I don't want you to think that...” Tor blushed and shook his head, wanting to wince and shy away from things.

“That's not totally true. She has a room, but she's been sharing a bed with me.” Getting ready he moved slightly in front of Karina, in case that news triggered a combat rage in the Baron.

Instead the man just smiled.

“Oh? Well good for her! About time something went right for her in that way. Things haven't always been easy for her. It isn't fair at all. Come, let's chat in the drawing room.” He pointed the way with his left hand, the right holding the handle of the basket firmly.

The talk didn't last too long, but the Baron did get an invitation to dinner, Karina couldn't be there, palace duties, but Tor would be and she promised to send over Alphonse if she could. After all, they wanted to keep at least one watcher on Tor at all time to make sure he didn't do anything too close to real work. Apparently the King and

Queen were in on that one too.

A real royal conspiracy.

When they walked out Tor hit his Not-flyer and looked at her sideways. After about fifteen seconds he grinned and looked where he was going.

"But if Rolph wakes me up the same way you did this morning, I'm leaving the Capital and never coming back."

Karina giggled.

"I'll be sure to warn him about that. Really I think he just wants to get laid." Giving him a sideways glance she grinned.

"Female company, most likely, though you are rather attractive. The palace is a little dry for all of us, honestly. Everyone is either a diplomat, dignitary, or related by blood. The servants are off limits in general, so that leaves almost no one. Your place is much more interesting! Plus the spies are all available for sex. Sara Debri, she's kind of cute, isn't she? Do you know if she's seeing anyone in particular?"

Tor thought about that. Did he know? She was cute, and lived on a military installation, sort of. If she wanted men, she had them. That didn't take a genius to figure out.

"Well, your brother for a while, maybe still, I don't think they've really stopped seeing each other. Me a little, about what we did, a bit more, a bunch of times. Um, maybe Ursala? I don't know on that, they never said one way or the other, but they had opportunity if they wanted too and both of them are great, so why wouldn't they? Are you interested, do you think?" That would be interesting, wouldn't it?

Karina tilted her head, clearly copying what he did all the time, and smiled a little.

"Well, I'm not that into girls, a diversion really. Bonita was only the third for me and you were the fourth guy, so I'm not absolutely certain. Can I... Do you think I could really be your girlfriend? I know you can't speak for Bonita, but will you, I mean do you want to? I..."

They were moving so Tor didn't kiss her.

"I'd love to. Though at this rate I think I'm going to start messing everything up soon. I can't pay proper attention so many ways, can I? Well, at least everyone else has people too. Trice certainly seemed happy to see Ridley last night. He's a good sort though, so I can't complain there, and really, all we've ever done is kiss a few times." It was true, but Tor suddenly felt embarrassed and that must have shown on his face because Karina smirked.

"You and Ridley? Well, I'd better leave that out, or Alphie will feel you're putting him off a bit rudely, don't you think? I mean, you two have been best friends for a long time, years now and you're both good looking, so you'd think if you were going to do anything with the

man it would be him. Really, you probably should, just to cement the relationship.” She gave him an odd look, one that spoke of thoughts he was glad he didn't know.

“I meant Trice, thank you very much.”

That got a laugh, “Sorry, misunderstood for a second, that's all. Really? You didn't even test her out in bed? You were going to get married. I mean, I slept with Raul just to see. He looks wild, but he's actually a good lover. Kind and gentle, attentive. I should have done more with him, and not gotten sucked in with Lilli. Yeah, Raul isn't as good looking, but looks don't matter that much do they? I mean, a good soul Counts more, right?” The tone was plaintive, as if begging him to agree. As if he wouldn't? It was just true.

“Kindness, a good heart, intelligence, all these things are more important than looks. But you're cute. Good enough looking that I'm getting looks as we go past people, saying, “how did he get to be with someone like her.” Though that might have been about the height difference too. People could be judgmental that way.

The Princess didn't say anything for a minute. Finally she cut her Not-flyer and settled in place, he had to float back about fifty feet to stand next to her.

Her voice was low when she spoke, not angry or sad now, but serious.

“They aren't looking at me, not at all, they don't even see me. Oh, a girl floating by, which is still interesting, even in the Capital, but not me. Even if they realized who I was, most of them wouldn't pay that much attention, not with you here. You're wonderful. Lovely and magical and brave. If I asked the next woman that passed if she'd like to have sex with you in an alley what do you think she'd say?”

Um... get away from me you freaks? Tor didn't say that, not wanting to be insulting, so he shrugged and paraphrased.

“Probably something shocked and frightened? I mean, who wouldn't? That's a weird thing to say to a woman at random, and they'd be within their rights to call the guard and have us both beaten. We'd have to let them too, because we'd deserve it.” Tor nodded at her confidently. After all, who did something like that?

Karina didn't wait, stopping a pretty woman walking along with another female, who wasn't as good looking, but smiled at them as she stood slightly behind the first woman, which made her face seem kind and friendly. Both were dressed in clean clothes that looked well used, but didn't have an air of lower class to them, so merchants maybe? They both looked to be about thirty or so, but well kept, even so. Tor nearly fainted when she actually said the words to the first woman, asking exactly what she'd said a few seconds before. The woman looked at him hard then Karina. Then she surprised him, because

instead of calling for guards, or even telling them to get lost... she smiled.

“How much?”

Without hesitation Karina said a gold. The woman countered with five silvers, since she wanted to save a little money for the celebration, the woman behind her offered three silvers if he'd do them both. Four if he'd use his mouth, she liked that better than regular sex anyway, she let them know. Karina clarified that to oral sex and not kissing, which seemed to be an important point to her. They agreed and money changed hands quickly. Too quickly.

He hadn't been able to do more than stammer a bit during the negotiation. Everyone had kind of just ignored him too. Like he was incidental to the process. A good being sold. No one asked the opinion of a hand pie did they?

It made Tor feel a little sad for the pastries in Debbie's shop.

The whole thing left him feeling shocked and speechless. It was a trap, one built for him personally, and so well that he couldn't get out of it. Refusing them now that they'd paid would be worse than calling them ugly, and even saying it was a joke would probably hurt their feelings. They weren't ugly or even women he wouldn't have liked to spend time with in general, but there were two of them and... he wasn't a whore. Was he? Apparently Karina thought differently and had just sold him as one.

Talk about rude.

Tor found himself led by the Princess to an alley just as she'd said. In the end he serviced both of them twice, once each with his mouth, one with his hand the other his manhood. It was embarrassing at first, but he let go of that and tried to focus on using all he'd learned and practiced to make sure they had fun. No matter what, they'd paid a lot for him, so giving them less than the best he could manage would be unconscionable, right? Both women handed him a coin, an extra silver each, as they left, and gave him a groping hug, but when one, the prettier of the two, tried to kiss him, Karina intervened physically, an arm across the woman's upper chest, and gave her a stern look.

“No kissing. That's extra.” It was almost comical. After all that kissing was an issue? It was absurd.

So much so he nearly cried.

Tor felt used as they walked away. Not by the women, who'd paid a fair price, more than fair he thought, not really knowing normal rates, but by Karina. She turned to him though and kissed him, the taste of the women still on his lips, in his mouth. If she minded, it didn't show, instead she hugged him tightly and whispered in his ear huskily.

“So... yes, Tor, they want you. No games, no set up. We could do

that again and double the price if we went to the nice district and probably get ten golds if I hit up some of the dowagers that have come for the week. A full gold for an hour's work... A good girl whose would be out here for half the festival to make that, unless she offered really kinky things. Before her pimp took most of it. They didn't know you were the Wizard Tor either, or a noble at all. Just some good looking, and as it turned out, talented boy whore. Do you really not know what you look like or something? You're always so down on yourself. It seems phony you know, you always pretending your ugly or a troll or whatever."

Oh. That.

"Yeah... Burks, Count Lairdgren, well he explained that, it's part of my pattern. He said I was really good looking, but basically I can't see it in myself. I don't, even when I thought he looked good when he de-aged himself. His real appearance is basically like this, I guess, exactly really, same age and all. Taller obviously, by about five inches. It's that Ancient thing. Your parents told you?" She might have forgotten, it wasn't like it would have mattered to her at the time, right?

It turned out that finding out a friend of yours won't age, and might live for thousands of years or more wasn't something you just let go of and didn't think about. She shrugged and offered to buy him something with the money he'd earned. After her eighty percent of course.

"Wait, pimps take that much? Why? Protection... but it isn't that dangerous is it? Do they have to fight every third man or something?"

Karina didn't really know herself. It was the tradition though. As it was she kind of felt she might have gotten taken on the price for him. Talented boy whores were hard to find. Especially famous ones. She'd make a killing, she informed him wickedly.

"So, you really, honestly, don't know what you look like? It... explains so much. Like why what Maria Ward and Cousin Patricia said about you hurt, even when everyone else probably just wrote it off for the most part. They were angry and said obviously untrue things. Like when a girl claims a man has a small penis or isn't good in bed, even if their huge and wonderful at it? You're a stupid and ugly boy? Hardly. Anyone looking at you knows it isn't true instantly. Maria probably didn't even think about the words she was saying and just let loose with the worst things she could think of. The rest, well, not everyone is tall, but it's hardly a crime, or even unattractive, even to noble women. A lot of noble women actually prefer their men to be smaller than they are, it's a power thing you see. They can feel dominant that way. You like having sex with men? Well they probably hoped so. I'd kind of like to see that myself... maybe later? You like children? No

one that's even stood in the same room with you would think that, not if it was longer than ten minutes at least. No one would ever have thought what they said was true hardly at all. What Lilli said about me, now a lot of that was true. I'm not that pretty, and no, it's not like you where I just don't see it. Cute? Sure, I clean up well and all that, in a three hundred gold dress with full make-up, but I'm not Varley. She's gorgeous, knows it too. But a lot of people probably didn't think those words would hurt you at all Tor. A regular boy maybe, or if you were really ugly or stupid, but you?

"But if you can't see it, that might make sense. Do you think your stupid too then?"

"About average?" Even having been told otherwise it was still his answer.

That got a nod, but not an agreement. As they walked she went silent and finally kissed him again. She didn't say anything else at all, so eventually they went back to the palace and she traded places with Rolph who patted him on the back gently, not triggering the shield at all.

"Alright Tor? You look confused and baffled. More so than normal I mean. Anything I can help with?"

He didn't talk until they were well away from the palace outside the wall and part way to his house. Then he told his friend everything that had happened. Everything.

Rolph seamed... impressed really, which Tor didn't get at all.

"She sold you on the street, and the first two women double teamed you for a gold? Damn. That's... both impressive and a bit creepy. On her part. More than a bit. To copy a phrase of yours, "who does that?" I mean, I guess she made her point, but since when did she turn into an insane person? And why did you go along with her? You could have just said no and left, or told them it was all a joke... Of course you got free sex out of it, so there's that. I wonder if that would work for me?" He shook his giant head a bit mournfully.

"Probably not. Take the whole heir thing away and I'm just another royal out looking for some action. Women don't pay for that, they get paid for it. God I need to get laid! The whole time with Ferra... she was willing, but Gemma was right there, we slept in the transport mainly and the day I have sex in front of a thirteen year old girl is the day I cut it off and join a monastery. Fourteen... well that's legal and all, but thirteen is still just a kid. I don't suppose you have any extra girls at your place you could recommend me too? Over thirteen hopefully?"

It was a clever change of subject, subtle, and sensible. Rolph couldn't change what had happened and Tor hadn't been hurt or abused, not really. He could have walked away, just not without

offending the women. But if someone they thought was a whore refused sex with them, what would that do to their self-esteem? Tor wouldn't have done that. Not ever.

Karina probably didn't know it, or wouldn't have believed it if she'd been told. It was just something that had happened, and he'd kind of found it interesting, hadn't he?

With just a little more rationalization Tor figured he could be good with the whole thing.

"Um, well, there are a lot of women there now and most of the women from Warden seem pretty friendly. Or... I think that if you were nice about it, Bonita Coltress would be up for it. I... just promise not to steal her forever, right? Collette might as well. She's nice, really pretty too, so I'd certainly ask there. Ursala, if she stops by of course. I'd like to spend time with her too, so if you see her first, remind her of that? Obviously if you're going to be married you get more attention from her, that's only right. Sara might be in. The rest are related to you. Well, Maria isn't... Collette is her prettier sister by the way. Have you met?"

They hadn't. That could work out then. The first time Tor had met her she'd been trying to meet Rolph at a party, there with Count Thomson. They might not like each other that way, or they could possibly both end up being too busy, but Tor could make some introductions. After all, Rolph was his best friend in the whole world. Any women should love him on sight, shouldn't they?

Of course.

A bit of giddiness ran through him at the prospect. It tickled his soul a little. Tor had never been in a position to set someone up before. Probably not a good idea, given his own track record in relationships, but it might be nice to try. Maybe he was better about it all when it wasn't him personally? When they got to the house, it was filled with people. About three hundred of them.

There was not one, but two new levels on the top, a new set of windows showed movement behind about half of them, a steady train of carriages ran the streets, mainly magical ones in a variety of colors and styles, noticeable because they didn't have wheels. Some were driven by Warden people and a few by Kolb's giants, some of whom Tor was used to seeing on the other end of a sword, usually with some pain involved. For him. They were all good, some of the best. Especially armed like they were right now. They needed to be updated, but they were better armed by far than the Royal Guard or the elite military units.

They found a harried and brittle looking Collette smiling as yet another person walked in, when Tor moved to her she looked at him, sighed and hugged him tightly, looking at Rolph with trepidation. The

Prince smiled, but Collette narrowed her eyes, looking as if she'd hurt him if he dared to try and beg a room. They had the rooms, Tor knew that. If they didn't they could expand or even put up another dwelling somewhere else. It was probably the stress then, trying to deal with hundreds of demanding royals that thought Collette was a servant, not one of them. Not their hostess. Sounded like what they'd think at least. As a group.

Freking royals and their entitlement.

"Collette, don't snap and kill us, please. This is Prince Alphonse Cordes, he wants to date you sometime. Possibly not tonight. I'm planning to run him past Nita first. Alphonse, this is Collette Coltress. I don't know for certain, but I bet if you help her right now she'll be your friend. What can we do to help?"

Collette laughed and hugged him again, then bowed to the Prince, and hugged him too. Tor thought it was a bit friendly since they'd just met, but Rolph seemed to enjoy it, so he didn't say anything.

"Please? Help? Tor, could you guide people to their rooms and... Prince Alphonse, could you help me greet people? That would do I think. Half the people coming are being turned away from the palace, which is fine, we have the room, but they keep expecting us to wait on them too, and we don't have that kind of staff. Not even close. We can feed them and the beds make themselves, but they're calling for things like warm baths to be drawn up, even though the tubs are right there and all they have to do is tap a few sigils! One fellow even asked for a girl to be sent up to "relieve his tension". When I mentioned we don't have anyone like that here, he suggested that I would do just fine. His wife was standing right next to him too! It was all I could do to not put him through a wall. How does your mother do it?" Collette looked ready to start ripping at her own hair.

Which would be a shame, Tor decided. It would make her look funny.

The Prince closed his eyes and focused, his clothing turning from a nice and friendly blue summer suit with no buttons into a dark purple and gold thing in silk and velvet, with the royal coat of arms over the heart. The shoes on his feet turned into black boots that disappeared under the pants, in all it looked a bit intimidating.

Opening his eyes he gave Collette a tight smile that Tor had seen made the business sharks of Debris house scramble for legal loopholes to keep themselves out of prison.

"I don't know how she does it really, but I don't think many men suggest she service them in her own foyer either. From this point on, simply direct anyone too troublesome to me. I assure you that mother only wanted people given a place to stay, there was no assumption

that your guests wouldn't adhere to the basic rules of politeness and civility. Please accept my apologies for any hardship we've caused you and know that from now on I'll back you personally at need. If we have to fight, I'll go high, you take low, alright?"

The look Collette gave the Prince spoke of true gratitude then and she grinned. It was the happiest Tor had seen her in days.

Tor guided, carried bags and finally grabbed follow along floats from his room, using them to handle the luggage. It ticked him off that people weren't being nice to his friends. None of them were servants, except the palace staff that had come to help, and they were guests in a way too. Friends come to help, even if they were being paid for it.

It would be rude to kick people out, wouldn't it? Maybe he should set up another place and let the trouble makers get their own food and drink? Tor considered the idea for a while as he walked people to their rooms and helped them get set-up. Most of those were, if not polite exactly, no worse than any stranger would be in a new place. After his fourth trip he came down to find a fight going on in the doorway. Not just an argument either, and actual fight.

An attack really.

A rather drunk, and decently large royal in black, glass bottle of clear amber fluid still in hand about half gone already, punched at Collette with his right fist. The bottle in his left started to swing like he was going to hit her with it. She didn't move, much, just blocking on instinct, but as Tor and Rolph ran towards her position the bottle hit her shield, splashed stinking liquid all over, which was followed by a tinkle of glass as the bottle snapped in the man's hand, meaning the blow hadn't been playful in any way. The fellow was at least forty, decent looking, but nothing special and didn't seem to get that the pretty blond girl in front of him wasn't there to, as he put it "get on her knees and lick his ass". If there was a ruder thing to say to someone trying to help you, Tor couldn't think of it. Of course being impolite wasn't something he'd ever excelled at, was it?

The worst he'd ever done was tell a man to go fuck himself. That person being Countier first Scotty Ross, a man that was perhaps the single biggest human being Tor had ever seen. Even other royal giants called him a giant. Easily ten feet tall. Muscled too, like Count Ford, it wasn't just the thin tall build of the King or Rolph. Tor thought about this at that exact moment because the man himself stepped up behind the loud and rude drunk, placed his right hand on the top of the others head, and picked him up by it. The man kicked and flailed for a second, but then stopped, realizing perhaps that twisting around by his head might not be the best idea in the world.

The voice was deep and calm sounding this time, instead of all

tense and angry sounding like it had been every time he'd spoken to Tor.

"That's rather a lot to ask of a woman you're assaulting at the moment, even if you can't manage to hurt her. That should be a signal to stop, don't you think? I'm pretty sure she's wearing a shield and the way she was just moving, I'm pretty sure she's about to kick your ass if you don't stop, even if she doesn't have one." Without any perceivable effort Ross turned and looked at Collette.

"Excuse me please, my lady..."

"Coltress. Collette Coltress. May I help you?" She said with a genuine smile. Of course reeking of liquor or not, her antagonist was still dangling from the larger man's hand, which had to be uplifting, given everything.

Tor liked it.

"Perhaps... Do you have a room? I have my family with me, four of us, but we can share, this year a lot more people have come down it seems and we were told we should try here, but that nothing is guaranteed. Obviously we'll understand if there's no room left."

Tor walked towards the man who's face fell a bit when he found out it was Tor's house. He went still when Tor bowed humbly at the waist and apologized for what he'd said and done the last time they'd met. He didn't bother with a truth device, because he wasn't certain at all that he really didn't think the man kind of deserved being intimidated by a young man literally half his size and a sixth his weight. The guy had kind of asked for it. That didn't mean it had been right of him to act that way himself though.

Scotty looked at the man he was holding up, "I can't really bow back at the moment, not without falling over..."

Ah, that made sense.

"Well... I think for my part, that if you say, took that man and set him down outside, I wouldn't be displeased with that at all instead. I don't know what the rules are for drunken nobles... Prince Alphonse, could you help me with this? I'm lost here."

That didn't take him, it turned out, just Rolph and a few of the Ward people, so he showed the Ross family to not one but two rooms. Then he fixed the beds so that Scotty and his eight foot tall son, Gary, wouldn't hang over the end. It was the work of a few moments to make the beds extend, the sheets and blankets with them. They both thanked him as if that were special. Before he left Scotty's room the giant bowed.

"I pushed you. Back then. At the fire. I was wrong. I apologize." It wasn't a good one compared to his, but Tor had probably had more practice lately. A lot more. He bowed back.

"Well, it was a tense thing, with the fire and all that. I hope we

can be friends in the future? Generally more fun over all, Don't you think?"

"We're friends now? Good, I won't have to feel bad about staying at your place uninvited and eating up all your food then." The tone was jovial so Tor winked and left them all to settle in.

As he walked away Tor seriously decided to get Collette to order in extra food. Those guys were huge and Gary was looking to end up at least as big as his father. Larger probably if he kept growing into his twenties like most of the nobles did. Maybe a few whole cows would be good? Or a dozen pigs? They could get the Warden people to help them dig pits to roast them. Tor wondered if it would work in the dry soil around the Capital.

The whole thing was a mad house, but the drunk was gone when Tor got back to the foyer, which calmed the tone down a lot. About twenty minutes later Tor happened outside to see how the set up was going, and found the drunkard sitting on the bench of the ducking booth, which was filled with ice water already. It seemed to be a test run, though a small crowd was gathering. Collette had donated several hundred pounds of ice for it. Wise, since they needed to make sure any problems were fixed as fast as possible.

The whole thing looked good, very festive Tor thought. Brightly colored in purple and gold, with a green border, since Lairdgren was sponsoring the event. It had a clear front that was probably a shield, not glass, but not one he'd made personally. The effect was good, you'd be able to see the desperate and cold nobles as they sank. A rather angry looking Collette was hurling balls at a red and white target, each one getting closer as she got a little practice. On the seventh one the ball did its job and the man dropped, submerged in the water, going wide eyed for all to see, and then came back up, screeching.

Heh. Cold water was cold. Go figure? It served the man right though. Who treated someone as nice like Collette in such a fashion? As it was Tor wondered if he should kick the man out anyway, for having assaulted his friend like that. He decided to, then and there, making a point of telling everyone that could hear, including Collette. When the noble climbed out of the water, a hard task without help, the booth designed to make it so it seemed, he pulled the man aside.

"Right. You're not welcome in my home any more. If you have people with you, they can stay, but you have to go and find other accommodations. If you can't, you can sleep behind the main building, but if I catch you accosting any of my friends, or guests, in any way, I won't be nearly as polite and forgiving as this, do you understand? As it is you can bet that the Queen will hear about this. We'll try to avoid telling the King, because Richard would likely come and kick your

behind himself if he heard. Consider yourself lucky.” The part about the King wasn’t true, but it made for a nice counterpoint to just “telling” on him.

The man blanched and cursed a little, but didn't try to hit him or anything, which he'd half expected really.

Tor went back to work and wondered what the next day would bring. He really kind of hoped it would just be easy for once. Eventually something had to be, right?

Right.

Chapter six

Someone was wrapped around him when he woke up, a tall someone who smelled nice. Like jasmine and mint. The false dawn gave enough light through the large window that he could see it was Petra when his eyes cleared enough to make anything out. Karina and he had work, so he needed to go find her he decided, wondering if she was at the palace still. Just showing up there to grab her for the day sounded like less than fun. It could take hours just to get in, and if she was hung-over, well that didn't sound much like a vacation to him.

Locating her wasn't all that hard it turned out. As soon as Tor stood up and actually looked around. She was in bed with them, sleeping well out of touching distance, but clothed, which Petra wasn't. Well over on the other side of the huge thing Rolph was curled around a smaller form, Bonita? They were both naked and it seemed like they'd been more than a little friendly at some point. Well, that was good. It had to have been freaky for poor Karina, but she kind of deserved it.

Selling him as a whore on the street. Hmph.

It wasn't his normal way, but he needed to get her back before she tried to do it again.

How?

He didn't have a clue.

Still the whole scene had felt a little... professional on her part. Like she'd lived the scene before in some role or another. Tor had a fear that the name Lilli would pop into the conversation if he asked about it. The more he found out about that girl... no, bitch was the right word there, the less he liked her. He was tempted to just have her rounded up for theft and sent off to prison or, lashed or whatever they did to people like her in the Capital. Normally he just let stuff like that go, but in this instance he could make an exception. Tor had too. She'd hurt his friend. Worse, she had been for a long time and no one really knew it.

Maybe one of those mines Jerral Derring had mentioned?

There was a lot to do and not a lot of time to get it done.

First he had to wake up the Princess, which he expected to be a fight, probably involving dragging her from bed. The second he touched her leg she sat up and mumble that she was awake, looked around blearily and climbed over the foot of the bed without even speaking again.

So much for that struggle... Tor grinned at her and waved towards the bathing room, but she gestured for him to go ahead, yawning a bit and sitting on the foot of the bed. After using the

restroom, shaving and brushing his teeth he dragged her into the shower with him, to her stifled laughter, and helped her scrub up, which got sleepy smiles, and pleasant sounding offers for more interesting things.

“Teh, we don't have time right now. Later maybe? If you're not too tired out from servicing Box all morning I mean?” He was teasing, but her eyes went wide and she looked over her shoulder as he washed her lower back, slightly shocked.

“What? I'm trading your virtue for hand pies... Sell me on the street. I'll show you, won't I? You totally deserve it too. I better not hear any complaints from him either. If he doesn't look exhausted by the end of the day you'll hear about it.”

She turned back around and pushed off the wall with both hands, moving back into him, not to get away, just cuddle closer, pressing against him wetly. It was a provocative move, complete with saucily shifting hips, but he moved back a little, smiling. It wasn't like he was really mad after all.

“Oh. That's... fair. Alphonse yelled at me about that. He said I shouldn't have done it, and that if I tried it again he'd tell mom. Normally that wouldn't be such a big deal, I mean it's a bit of a naughty game, but there's no real harm in it, right? Lilli used to do that to all of us at random. Not me, but the others. I always thought it was because I was special to her or something, but that wasn't her point was it? I was just worth more to her than the others. For a while.”

Great... now he felt bad for her again. He kissed her neck.

“We have to go. Were actually late already, if we were real bakers. It's not like we're really working, but Jerral could come at any time. Oh! Duh...”

Running softly, both of them changing into soft soled shoes as they moved so there was barely a whisper on the stone floor, they went up two floors and to the left side, the east wing? Tor thought that was right, he always got a little confused on directions like that though. On Kolb's floor they found his door first, marked with his name handily enough, and knocked softly.

“Come!” The voice came instantly, it was firm, and didn't sound tired at all.

Still, he was in bed when they got in, covers up to his neck and eyes closed.

“Speak.” He told them, voice firm, but otherwise looking like he was asleep. Was he? If so it was a trick worth learning. Crises management and rest at the same time, Tor could get behind that.

“Hi Kolb, nothing huge, we need David Derring, it's a family matter for him, not an emergency for your crowd, I don't think, but

he'll need mornings off and probably some help from a few of your people in a few days time? Maybe sooner? Till about ten or eleven in the morning each day? Then we can return him. If that's alright, I mean?"

Without ever opening his eyes he told them to go three doors down on the right. Kolb wasn't sharing his room, but David was, in with a Baron, a full Baron. So Tor felt a little bad about knocking on the door so early.

It was the huge and scary guy too, the one that got sent to deliver messages to Counts and dukes when they didn't want the person bossed around by them. He looked surly all the time, especially now, sleepy and grumpy, but when he saw Karina his eyes lit up. Then he looked down and saw Tor, his face happy enough for a second, then it went serious.

"Sir?" He said respectfully.

"Just call me Tor. Anyway, roust Davie for us, if he's in, please? Mission for him." That got more action than Tor expected, the young Countier, nearly as tall as the Baron next to him now, pushing seven-foot something at fifteen or sixteen years old, was at the door in less than ten seconds. He was half asleep, but nodded and asked for seven minutes to get ready, without hearing more than they needed him for the morning. Tor tossed him a clothing amulet and suggested student browns. It was what he was wearing and Karina had copied him, even to the heavy and worn looking fabric, instead of silk. It would look about right in the shop for all of them, being so young.

Kids working the holiday. It wasn't unheard of after all. Even for nobles. It would be pretty odd if people knew who they all were, but the job itself would probably throw most people off at first. Princesses and Countiers didn't work in bakeries. That meant that these two couldn't possibly be that kind of person, right? It made for a good disguise.

The tall boy had managed a shower and shave in that time, which was half amazing, and loaded up with gear and weapons. Tor didn't expect that level of trouble, but there was a war on and who knew what would happen? The Baron asked if he'd be needed too, and Tor nearly said no, but then he nodded.

"Guard duty? Can you relieve us at ten in the morning? Dress like... well, nicer than us probably, low level merchant? Or maybe just a guard? The kind that a merchant would hire if theft were a problem? I don't think we could pass you off as a shop boy no matter how hard we tried." He gave directions and sent the large man back to bed, he had hours to sleep after all and didn't look well rested. Tor reminding him to clear it with Kolb first, in case someone else would need to be sent or something like that. Stealing his people was a bit

heavy handed after all, and the weapons master was not someone Tor wanted ticked at him. Karina was in the chain of command for this group, but one Torrance Baker was definitely not. Really he wasn't in the chain of command for anything.

They used Not-flyers and sped along faster than was probably sane, both of them filling Davie in as they traveled. At the end of the story their friend didn't speak at all for a while. When he did the voice was quiet and far more gentle than Tor had expected.

"Thank you for not calling the guards. I'll... see to his punishment. What was the value of the item he tried to steal?"

It was a lot, a hundred gold even. Davie swallowed and offered to pay for it in recompense out of his own pocket. Tor shook his head no, knowing what the boy made per year was only four golds more than that, as well paid as he was, and he'd need some supplies and what not. After all, Tor was paying him anyway, so it didn't seem economically sound. The restroom was cheaper for him to make than the supplies he'd have to arrange for his friend anyway, Tor told him.

Karina's answer was better though.

"No, he's family. If we're too close to get married that has to count. Besides, if he does anything useful we're pretending he was set to this without the little bit of real theft first, so if anyone asks tell them he did all this at my behest, understood? We don't need to shame him over it. Just make sure he learns to think first next time, yes? He's good looking enough to not need to resort to theft to get laid. Especially by the like of Lilli. Also, he got his butt kicked by a girl, a soft Princess at that. He might want to work on that, right? It would be a good reason for you and your friends to have bruised him a little. Practice I mean."

Davie nodded. Nothing more. His look was grim though. Closed down really. Hard to read, but Tor guessed it wasn't a happy thing for him, finding out his younger brother was a thief.

In the shop he was all smiles and hard work, doing exactly what was suggested, and working with a will. Karina took the lead there and kept giving Box worried glances, which wasn't fair at all, the man just worked, hard and professionally, mainly with Tor, batch after batch of hand pies, the cooling rack staying full the whole time, Davie and Kari filled transport trays for delivery all morning long, and by eight they had four of the tall enclosed wooden racks ready to go and a good start on the product the shop needed for the day. Shortly after Tor got floats on the front of the wheeled racks, just to make things easier, Jerral came rolling in, looking a bit hesitant.

With good reason.

Debbie glared at him, but that wasn't what caused him to freeze in the front section of the cool bakery. The magic plate, Tor's old style,

made in copper with green acid etching for a sigil sat on the wall still doing its job after a year. He nearly reached out to check the field strength but managed to stop himself in time. That wouldn't kill him or anything, but it would jar his own pattern just a bit if he did it. The changes made to himself on that tiny level being what allowed him to perceive what other things were after all.

Quiet the mind and focus on the other object, and you automatically went into resonance with it. Then it made slight changes to your own field, which by noticing what was different in your own mind, gave you information. You affected it too, but just sensing wasn't that huge a deal, anyone could learn that. The point though, was that it made some changes. Temporary ones, but being damaged already he didn't want to push it.

"Jerral." David said, his voice even and slow. "I hear you had a bit of trouble yesterday? I won't tell father, but you're going to have to be punished."

The other boy, only a year younger, but much smaller than his brother, a foot and a half nearly, nodded. He was dressed in very nice black velvet clothing, which was probably boiling him alive already. The kid was red at least.

"Right. I accept that. Whatever's required. I... was stupid. Let the little head think for the big one and... Yeah, it was all a mistake." He bowed. To everyone. Even Box, who looked surprised, but awkwardly bowed back.

"I apologize for... everything. I cannot ask for forgiveness unearned as yet, but please know that I intend to do my very best to see this right. I ask only that no other be harmed for my actions. Please. I beg this of you." This part got addressed to Tor directly, not anyone else.

It was a strange way to put it, but Karina translated for him, possibly getting that some of the people in the room might not understand? That was smart of her. Correct too.

"Yes... trying to steal from a merchant that's a close personal friend of both a Princess and Master Tor himself is definitely a mistake. More to the point, given her resources, if Debbie decided to go after you and yours it would be a mess. She may not be able to take on the military of county Derring alone, but she could do an awful lot towards it if she decided to. Hire mercenaries, outfit them with magical resources that few have... It was a very dangerous game you played. Thankfully that isn't happening. This time."

The boy went white, but nodded and bowed again, much lower this time, after looking at his brother. Davie just nodded at him sharply, three times. Almost as if to say that the words were true.

"Not a small point Jerral. Every person in this room could have

your life and the lives of those dear to us, just for knowing you. I'm including Box in this. You think that Master Tor wouldn't back him if it came to a fight? He's well known for protecting his friends no matter what, Which you know. I told you about how he dueled Count Rodriguez in my place. Trust me, the Count is tougher than you are."

Box came out with a tray of regular bread, oat loafs, just then.

"Ah, not that it's my business overly, but the boys been shamed enough I think. He's working to make it right. I don't... I don't think that threats will make a difference now. I mean..." He tapered off and looked down, as if remembering to act humble, even if he didn't feel that way. All the royals in the room with him probably.

Tor clapped his hands together to break the mood a little.

"Right. I agree with Box. Jerral stumbled. He's on his feet again now and won't make the same mistake twice. Do you have anything for us?"

He had some news indeed, which wasn't actionable, yet, but served as proof to Tor that they needed to get at least some of the other girls out of the trap they were in. As promised and seeming very pleased with what Jerral had "stolen" for her, Lilli had offered him Ali for the night, to do with as he pleased. At first it had seemed fun, but when he'd moved from some gentle kissing and let his hands play over her just a little, the girl started crying.

"She didn't ask me to stop or anything, and wouldn't say what was wrong when I tried to find out, she just shook her head and asked me not to tell. She was going to, you know, do stuff, with me anyway, I think, but she was crying. I couldn't make her. It was too much like..." Jerral gave David a meaningful look and both sets of eyes closed down, emotion fading instantly.

"She said bad things would happen to her if Lilli found out, so I played it off and told her it didn't matter. I told Lilli I was happy enough with her and she... she offered to sell Ali to me for three more devices. I mean, to keep. Like a slave. That's illegal. Well, theft is too, but, I mean, that's so much worse... I can't even, I don't know. I didn't say anything, because... I don't know... What do I do now?"

Thief or not, Jerral didn't seem to be that bad a guy. He wouldn't force a woman, and felt bad for someone trapped in a poor situation. It counted for a lot right now. Tor walked with Debbie through the little side section shop with all the devices and they selected out five to give the boy, so that he could "buy" Ali. Then he was to bring her to Tor's house, where they could hide her away in comfort while they finished the rest of the little debacle.

Selling people? Her own friends? What the hell? No, what the incredibly evil, freaking hell.

The bake shop had customers coming in, and they recognized Tor,

since he'd been there the year before and hadn't changed, except his new longer hair. He tried to visualize his hair on Burks younger looking, too pretty face and realized that he probably looked like his own sister, practically. Maybe it wasn't that bad, but he really needed a haircut.

After Jerral got a good ways down the street Debbie ran out yelling "thief!" but no one could tell who she was talking about, as intended, and the black clad boy made a clean escape. They all kept working until ten, as planned. A "theft" didn't mean the baking would do itself after all. Kari learned to run the cash box, since she was prettier than Box, and Tor was actually a slightly better baker than the other man, even if he was a good bit younger.

Tor remembered what Burks had said and tried to do everything as well as he could and figure out little tricks so that he'd get faster and make a better product each time. That was harder than it seemed, since a hand pie was just filling with a folded pie crust around it, but he worked at it anyway. Box just worked, and even after only a few hours there was a visible difference between what they made. Tor's stuff looked more consistent in shape and more evenly golden brown when they came out of the oven.

At ten, almost on the dot, Kolb walked through the door followed by the mean looking Baron and one of his tough looking female instructors, who was only about twenty-five, maybe a little older, and could probably take the larger men in combat half the time. She was new and even though Tor hadn't seen her closely before, she reminded him of someone.

Karen, though for the life of him Tor couldn't figure out why. This woman was leaner, older and a good bit less attractive than she'd been. Well, with two of his dead friends brothers in the room it wasn't shocking that he'd think of her, or see her in other people, was it?

David had said that this new girl, Dara, was better than any of them. Well, not Kolb, but he was probably one of the top thousand or so fighters in the whole world. Burks was better, at least from the one time Tor had seen the man fight, but even then Tor wouldn't have wanted to place bets one way or the other. The weapons instructor had skill and size, and while Burks may be — at least nearly — the best fighter in the world, he was only a little bigger than Tor, so not very large at all. Some people liked to pretend different, but that mattered in a real fight. Big people generally did better.

Debbie walked over and bowed when he came in. Tor got hugs from her, but these people commanded respect and deference? Sounded about right really. If they weren't his personal friends and acquaintances he'd probably have felt the same way. They all just looked so mean.

"I heard you may want our assistance?" The large, totally bald man asked, the question was for Tor, but Debbie, not knowing anyone was coming, answered, it being her shop.

"We could use some help. We had a horrible theft today! Just a boy, but... well, if word gets out that we can't stop thieves, we might as well just open the door and start giving things away. How much would your services go for? We probably won't need anyone for too long, but for the length of the festival?"

Kolb didn't blink, reorienting on the merchant woman as if he'd been talking to her originally, his posture shifting ever so slightly. Like he was suddenly applying for a job. It made perfect sense to Tor. The man's deep voice was slightly deferential when he spoke next.

"We're among the best ma'am, so we don't come cheaply. A gold per day for complete coverage, that's two shifts of two people each and we'll have someone watch the place all night for an extra half gold per day. Or stay inside, if you'd rather? We can provide more guards if you wish, at extra expense, but frankly, small times thieves probably won't even pop their heads in the door with people like mine here." The smile he gave her was confident and professional.

Reassuring.

It was probably true too. If Tor was a thief he definitely wouldn't want to challenge the big Baron just for a bauble, or even gold. It would be safer to move on to easier pickings.

Tor had an idea though.

"What about a patrol for the whole street, in addition I mean? Say for the duration of the festival?" It would put more bodies on the ground when Karina was there and they could be primed to keep an eye on Lilli and her crew.

Kolb gave him a small partial bow of acknowledgment.

"Three golds extra per day for that. Setting a patrol during goings on like this with less than six people out won't work. For that we'll both walk the streets and check with each tradesman in the area hourly, so they know who to go to with trouble. We'll coordinate with the city guard as well, since we're in good standing with them. Four golds per day in all. Night coverage too though."

They made a deal and Debbie paid, half up front, for the entire festival. As a bonus Tor "hired" Kolb to be his personal body guard while in transit, a gold for the whole week. If nothing else it would probably stop Karina from selling him into prostitution again. Plus that way he could explain what was going on to the man without anyone really overhearing. There was so much to tell and some of it was convoluted. The large and dangerous man just nodded as they moved along on foot back towards Tor's place.

"I see. We need to isolate this girl Lilli, and make sure she isn't

going anywhere. Kari, could you provide location information for us? I'll set people to it immediately. Tor what are your plans for the day?" The man used the Princesses shop name easily, as if she was exactly what she seemed, a girl, possibly a merchant of some kind, helping them with the treats for the festival. That was good. Karina didn't even blink at it either.

Did he have plans though? After the bakery... just party stuff. Kolb shook his head and grinned. His plan involved Tor running around the city twice and then being beaten in public as a spectacle for the amusement of children. Sighing a little Tor agreed, which got a smile and a head shake from the man.

"You could say no you realize? I can't really order you to do it..."

"Yeah, but I need to, it will suck, but I've kind of been relying on magic to bail me out for a while now. Time to actually put the kind of effort I have into building in some other directions too. Running and fighting are a good starting place, right? Baking too."

If Kolb had a giddy and girlish look, what he did next was it, a grin and a wink that looked far too happy.

Tor didn't trust it at all.

When the Warden people took the baked goods and started setting up an early food table, a line forming before the second light colored wooden tray of golden pastry was even laid on the purple and gold linen cloth, Tor altered his shoes for running comfort and started trudging slowly. Either the wall was bigger than he thought, or he was slower, but nearly two hours later Tor came back to find a square for fighting practice had been set up, five instructors setting people, mainly young men under twelve, but a few girls and some older people as well, through the basics of sword fighting.

Kolb picked a giant, a huge woman, who wore full practice armor, blue gray leather over thick padding that covered her arms and legs, but left gaps at the joints for movement and protected her head well, neck partially and left her sides nearly uncovered. She held a heavy wooden practice blade, the kind that really hurt when it hit you. He'd been knocked out more than once by them himself, so he knew they worked.

"Tor, if you'd bout with Bressa? No magic please, of any kind. Other than that, no rules, other than practical safety."

That just meant she could hit him for real, but not kill with her wooden bludgeon. Tor couldn't even use his shield, so he had to take it off, since it would turn on the first time Bressa swatted him. Well, if anyone tried to kill him here, Kolb and his people would protect him. Or he'd die. One way or the other.

Bressa didn't wait for a signal, so Tor started out by running away, to the laughter and delight of everyone watching, including the

children. It meant Bressa didn't hit him with that club, so Tor did it. A few of the watchers didn't chuckle or hoot, instead stood and regarded the show seriously almost as if they expected him to manage something clever or skillful. He mentally found the weapons rack and worked his way towards it, managing to grab a small sword, also of dull blond wood that would have been a mere knife in one of the giants hands, but suited him well enough.

People forgot that blades were heavier when you swung them. Go with too heavy a blade and your whole body became committed to the movement. Too large a weapon and a body could swing in a half circle with each blow, you couldn't help it if the weight was enough. If he did that here, the combat giant would probably beat him bloody, by accident.

He had to keep moving.

Because really, on any given day he wanted to avoid crippling beatings if he could.

The fight went on and on, Tor trying to pay attention and learn while he did it, instead of just scrambling and flailing like he normally did. Bressa finally killed him, a single blow that took him on the shoulder and drove him to his knees, but he managed a stab that slid under her armor and would have done more than that if the blade had been sharp.

"Mutual kill." She said, happy enough about it, as if she'd expected him to actually win somehow. Because, yeah, that happened. He didn't even have armor on.

Tor just struggled to keep the tears from his eyes and waved at her with a grin. As he did that Kolb came over and started to tear apart everything Tor had done, suggesting improvements. He almost always did something like it, but this time Tor stopped him more than once, and asked why, instead of just accepting what was said. Then asked for specific demonstrations of moves and when the large man left he spent about an hour trying to work though each of them in his mind while striking the air using the move as precisely as possible. It may not make him better, but it felt more engaged at least, which was something. Everyone broke for lunch, which included pulled pork sandwiches with a creamy sauce and banana's on the side, which someone had flown in from the south. It was good and filling enough, a special and exotic treat for him still, and most of the people from the Capital had never had such things at all. It was all Warden food.

They were giving it away to everyone for free, and had set up tables, about twenty of them, for people to sit at while eating, with weird. Round focus stone benches that went all the way around them and didn't move. They were a nice light tan color though, like glass, so the local focus stone product. With crowding and a bit of elbow

bumping six to eight people could use one at a time. It was kind of fun, even though he ended up at a table with a group of boys and girls that were all between ten and fifteen. Dressed in clothing that looked a little poor maybe, but they seemed happy enough over all.

The free food was good, and there was stuff for them to actually do this year. Games and prizes and events. Usually King's week had a few rallies and vendors in the streets selling greasy foods and wine, but there wasn't a whole lot for the kids. They were really excited about the music that was supposed to start at nine that night and run constantly until the end of the week. It was free for everyone, which included them too, right?

Free for everyone except Tor, that was. He was paying for it all. More gold was going just to that than almost any single other things except refreshments and food. Connie had insisted though and musicians were notorious for spending their money almost immediately, so it would go into the general economy fast enough that way. Nearly as fast as if he'd just given it away, and to more places. Looking at the excitement of the kids around him he was glad he'd agreed.

They were all friendly too, accepting him easily, without hesitation, and one, a boy of about thirteen, asked if he wanted to go around with them and look at things being set up. There were, the boy informed him soberly, these magic things that no one had ever seen and even if they weren't allowed to try them out ever, just saying they saw it would be worth the time. Tor smiled and told them that it sounded like fun.

After all, Tor considered, he needed to oversee part of the set up anyway, just to make certain no one got hurt.

The group of them, he didn't get their names, or give his own, but that seemed fine with everyone so no one bothered, walked with him in the lead to the edge of a vast empty space, nearly the footprint of about half the King's palace. Nodding to them all to stand back an older man, one of the Ward group, held up an amulet and activated it with his other hand, his white clothes and dark skin looking special enough to catch a little attention even before the mountain appeared before him. Then, as Tor had described, he carefully set the amulet into the "rock" in front of him, his right hand passing into the stone itself about four inches.

"Whoa!" The kids all said, or some version of that. One boy jumped and cringed away, then laughed about it, he was the youngest Tor thought, but not the smallest. Even the kids here were tall for their ages. All of them had normal looking dark hair, except one young girl with a sandy blond that set her apart slightly in this crowd, she was the shortest one, shorter than Tor even. He nearly blended

with his own black hair and plain looking worn clothing.

The mountain had a cave that went underneath it and really, was only half a mountain. The other half was a giant pool with huge, vast really, stone slides that looked scooped out of the living rock itself. There was a staircase in the stone that you got to from the tunnel and climbed up to slide down. They all watched eagerly as a small flying river connected itself to the top of the mountain, which was almost two hundred feet high, turning the slides into waterfalls. The water collected at the bottom of each of the seven lines of falling water until the level rose to about four foot high making a swimming pool. Then another flying line cleaned the water and returned it from there to the King's river.

It was impressive enough, and the slides went back and forth to slow the fall, it should work that way, he thought. He'd have to test it, since if there was any danger at all, he went first.

It was a rule.

The last time he'd let someone else go first he nearly died of a heart attack. Walking over to the tunnel mouth he was met by the Warden man who smiled and waved, first to him, then the kids behind him.

"These the testers then?" The man said with a huge smile, the go to expression for the people from his part of the kingdom it seemed. Better than frowns and curses, so he smiled back.

"Yes, but me first. No one goes down one of these until I do. If It's not safe only I should pay for my screw up, right?"

That got him a pat on the back and an easy sounding chuckle. The Warden people here were all easy going and nice, around him at least. Tor liked them. Then, they were the ones that did things like attend parties and things like that, even at home. So Larval attacks or not, generally happy people.

Behind him the kids milled uneasily, finally the oldest of them, a brown haired boy with deeply tanned skin, asked if that meant they were getting to try it too or not. At least the words were merely baffled, not demanding. The kids just clearly didn't expect to get anything for free, or have special treatment. Poor kids didn't.

Tor nodded and explained it all.

"Yes, that's right, we'll test each of the events. On this one we take our clothes off over here, by the benches, then walk through the tunnel, where water sprays over us, it should keep us cool while we're waiting to go up if there's a line and help keep the pool at the bottom clean, then we climb to the top and slide down. Wait for me though, to make sure I survive first, and don't go down till the last person has reached the bottom, we need to time everything so that the person managing it up top can make sure no one crashes, can everyone

swim?"

To Tor's mild surprise they all could. It made sense, with a river being right there, but people didn't often do the sensible thing with their children. The kids all said they didn't know anyone that couldn't swim.

Huh.

Learned something new every day.

The next oldest, the blondish haired girl that wouldn't ever make it to cute, much less pretty, stared at him openly when he turned off his clothing device, but when he glanced at where her eyes looked he understood. She wasn't staring at him, but all the devices around his neck. Around hers was a similar piece of hemp string with a coil of wire wrapped tightly around it in the front. It was iron, he thought, she glanced down and blushed.

She thought he was staring at her breasts, which were a little small, but real enough. He hadn't been though. If she was thirteen Tor would have been baffled, but she looked back up and smiled at him and walked over before they went to the tunnel.

"Um, those are the new Tor's right? Mine is too, kind of. I went to the shop at the bakery, by the south gate? The lady let me look at some and hold them. I tried to make a copy of one later, it's just a light, want to see?" The girl tapped the metal and a small but well defined nimbus of light came from it. It was just visible as they went into the slightly dark cave but Tor felt a thrill of excitement.

She'd made a copy of one of his lights?

Without training and without a template? From memory... after just getting to hold one for a few minutes? That showed real skill! He clapped getting everyone else's attention.

"Gah, Lyn's showing off her little light again," one of the younger boys said a bit derisively.

"Gonna be the next Tor you know. Like to see her make something like this! Come on, I want to try it!" The young boy was naked, they all were, and Lyn got a slightly embarrassed look on her face. It wasn't the nudity though, but what the other kid had said.

"I know I can't be that good ever, like Tor, but I can be good, if I learn how, I think. I heard that Tor went to school. Maybe I can go too? I don't know... we don't have a lot of money, gold, I mean, but I don't know... Maybe I could work and go to classes, just sit in the back and learn that way? I know, it's probably stupid, but there aren't a lot of people that even bother trying to become builders or even copiers. I know I can learn that, right?" She looked at him as if expecting derision.

Instead he shrugged and nodded at the light she'd made.

"That should be enough to get you a scholarship. You can read

and write?" It wasn't a given, even for a city kid. Not all of them went to school if they were slated to go into a specific trade, but Lyn nodded.

"Some. Mame taught me. Said I'd need it even if I went into milling or tanning. Even whores count coins, so I learned sums too. What's a schooler sip? A kind of drink?" The question was innocent and cute, but Tor gestured at her to follow as he walked.

"It means that someone else pays for you to go to school, so you don't have to scrub floors all the time instead of learning. There's a bunch opening up for next term at Lairdgren school up north. That's where I went. I dropped out though, because of a girl, which was stupid of me, don't you think? I should go back if I get a chance... Actually, I think I will this next year if they'll take me. I have a whole lot to learn yet and they have some of the best teachers anywhere. Even the Prince went there before the war. Don't tell though, because he may want to go back too, and it's kind of a secret, for safety and all."

The stairs were slightly rough underfoot, but it wasn't painful to walk on, just enough to stop people from slipping even if the stone got wet. So far so good. When he turned to look at her Lyn fairly gaped at him.

"Do you really think someone would pay for me to go? Who? How do I ask them too? Does it mean I work for them after or... I don't get it, what do I do?" She seemed eager, excited by the prospect even.

It took a while to get to the top, so Tor explained that there were a couple of scholarships she could get and that people would pay for her to go, just to have another good builder later. The King did most of them, that's how he'd gotten in, he confided in her. Countess Printer was doing a bunch too now and she could also check with the people in Tor's house down the way. Just go and ask for Collette, Rolph or Tor, he told her. Her eyes went so wide he was afraid they might fall out.

"What? Go up and just say "hey, you in there, send out the Wizard Tor so he can give me some gold for school"? I'm sure that would work!" She laughed at him like he was joking and pushed him, her damp hand slapping his bare back. His shield didn't kick in. Ah. He'd left it off. Oops, well, if it was gone he had more. Hopefully whoever picked it up would get good use from it if he didn't get it back.

"Seriously... try it. If you want to go to school and learn, you're going to have to work for it and do a lot of hard things. Facing down a fellow builder isn't even a challenge. What do you think he's going to do? Yell at you? I happen to know he almost never yells, and even if

he did, so what? Just show everyone the field you copied and they'll let you in. If they don't, come find me and I'll take you myself. But try it on your own first. It will impress people. Wear clothes though. I think dinner is at nine. Might as well get a free meal too."

The ride down the waterfall was fast and breathtaking, but fun and safe. There was a shield all the way around so you couldn't go flying off at all. It was just a matter of not going so fast that people drowned when they hit the water. It drove water up his nose, but that was fine, it was safe enough, he decided. That one waterfall slide at least. Tor made the trip six more times and then waited for everyone else to finish as he air dried and put his magic clothing back on. It occurred to him then that he could have worn swimming clothes and he blushed, but no one else had thought anything of a bunch of naked kids, not past the sight of them riding waterfalls at least.

The next event didn't need him to test personally, it was a fighting square, but the "weapons" were just weak shields that looked like swords in a glowing red about two and a half feet long and each person fighting got protected with a shield too, one that was strong enough to stop the swords blows and glowed a sudden and brilliant gold when hit, the look was kind of impressive. Get hit three times and you were "dead" and your sword vanished, leaving you holding only a focus stone handle. The cool thing was that you could block with the blades and it actually felt like hitting something real and made a clashing sound like metal would have. All the kids wanted to try it when it was explained to them, but Tor held back. He knew the system and actually had sword training. It wouldn't exactly be fair, would it?

Lyn kept staring at him, but now it wasn't just curiosity over his amulets he didn't think. No, now she probably saw a chance to make her dreams come true and he was someone that had knowledge of what she needed to do. That made him special to her right now. Hopefully she'd remember what he'd said and at least try. Burks had told him not to do everything for everyone, but it was so tempting to just make it all work for her. She needed to do it or it wouldn't mean as much. It was simple and obvious, but he had to fight not to do it anyway.

They wanted to keep playing with the "shield combat" gear but Tor saw that the next event was being set up already and got everyone to hurry over. This was the one he thought people would love the most. Or hate. You put on a harness that went around your middle and buckled in place, just so no one could drop it. After that you stood on a light tan focus stone plate that was about two foot wide and jumped. Then it took you into the air, magnifying your jump by about thirty times, slowly lowering you back to the plate. But you could also

jump up and out in any direction, so it would allow some stunts. It always took you right back to the plate no matter what you did though. As you moved through the air you left a multicolored trail of sparks and light. It would be impressive after dark and looked kind of neat even with the sun out.

The colors were in purple and gold to start, but could be set by the person running the device if they got bored with that. The lights worked well and the landing was more gentle than it would have been if he'd actually jumped up in the air a few feet. There was clapping when he finished, his new group of young friends mainly, but by the time they were all jumping around and doing tricks, about fifty people gathered to watch. Tor clapped along, because they were doing things that he'd never dreamed of, holding hands and spinning around each other leaving brilliant spirals, flips in mid air and little dances comprised mainly of hand and arm movements and spins.

After that there wasn't a lot more to look at yet, so Tor waved good bye to the others and called Lyn over.

"Remember what I said? I'm serious. Ask for any of those people and show what you've made, explain it to them and see what they say. Really, you should do it before dinner." She looked scared, but determined, which was better than Tor would have done at her age.

Was he asking too much of her? Well, if so, he'd make a point of tracking her down later and trying a gentler approach. The kingdom never had enough people that were builders, or even good copiers.

That thought made him want to slap himself in the head. He looked around for a rock, but couldn't find one. Well, later maybe. The idea was so basic, so... easy, that he should have thought of it before. It didn't even take any magic, not on his part.

Testing.

He'd set up a test and anyone that passed would get a full scholarship to Lairdgren. He could afford it. At first the idea was just for kids, but then he shrugged. If a person had talent, why shouldn't they get a shot? Most adults would have other things going on, jobs and families, but if they could work it out, why not? Was that doing too much for them? They had to have the will to try and talent to make it on their own, it was only a chance, if they took it.

Tor tried to hurry, but it took the rest of the afternoon, mainly because he had to go to Debri house to borrow a copying template. He'd stopped using them for the most part and didn't have any with him at all, not even old ones. Well, except the healing device one, but that was just too complicated to use for a test of people that hadn't done it before.

There had been a couple simpler ones in his gear, but Holly Printer had borrowed those. He wanted to take someone with him, so

he searched out Rolph, but he was actually working and being useful, helping load ice for an older woman driving a mule cart. There were a lot of older women in his line, probably because he was working with his shirt off and had a good bit of lean muscle on his giant frame. Who'd blame them for looking? Collette smiled the Prince's way when his back was turned, earning a wink from the woman on her cart. Well, they weren't being subtle, were they? Of course Rolph had a temperature equalizer on and magic clothing, so the lack of shirt was just to give them a show anyway, he realized.

Well then.

Tor grinned but didn't say anything. It never hurt to advertise, did it?

He wasn't always good with awkward social situations, Tor knew that, and even after apologizing to Heather, just showing up was a little nerve wracking. Especially since his little bit of rudeness before had actually ended up with him demanding all his templates back from them, which would have functionally killed their business for about a year or more. Going in asking for one now... awkward.

Changing on the doorstep, trying to be impressive, in green silk and dark brown leather, with soft boots in deep green, he knocked. There was a bell but it was higher than he could reach still. He wondered what they'd think if he came over someday and tied a rope to it? Better, he'd come at night. Even the Wards had a long rope on their doorbell and Count Ward was huge. The Debris didn't have that excuse. Tor glared at the bell, straining to look up when the door opened.

Instead of a doorman or butler, or even one of the people he recognized, it was a blond boy about his own height, if five inches taller counted as that really, who looked fifteen or so, maybe sixteen. When he looked down enough to see Tor, he smiled.

"Hi! I heard a knock. Um, this is Debris house... Is that what you were looking for? I mean the residence, not a shop or anything. But, well, if you need something I'm sure that someone here can find it for you. If we don't have it here, we'll send of it." The boy sounded charming, rather than professional, as if the offer wasn't what everyone would be getting if they came and knocked on the house door.

"Hello. I'm Tor. Torrance Baker? Anyway, is Heather Debris here or... Kris maybe? I'm coming unannounced, so I can come back if I need to, I just had an idea, and as always, that means running around looking half insane." Tor shrugged but the boy nodded.

"You're Tor? Sara said you were good looking, but I thought, you know, she was just saying that, because we kind of need you, but if I would have known I would have tried to meet you before. Come in!

I'll get people, um... can I get you drunk? Maybe out of those hot looking clothes?"

Tor froze, and thank god, smiled. The rules, he remembered, just in time to not make a fool of himself. It was a proposition and he didn't have to take it, but he couldn't be rude. What was he supposed to do though? He scrambled and his brain worked manically.

A lot of royals had same sex partners. Heck, people probably thought he and Rolph were an item, having been roommates, and then together so much after school. And this guy was cute, like a male version of Sara, so he was probably used to people saying yes to him. Gods. What to do? Finally he shrugged and just told the truth.

"Um, I come from a really rural place and men don't do things with other men like that. I'm not judging, or even saying no, but I doubt my backwoods mentality will allow for it any time soon. I don't want to be rude to you though, because it's a very nice offer, and you are very good looking. Unless I missed the meaning, which is possible, I'm new to all this stuff and like I said, the rules where I come from are really different. In that case just hit me a few times and well call it even?" Tor turned away a little and squinted, arms coming up slightly ready for the blow. If it came it would just hit shield, but it was a natural reflex for him.

The boy laughed.

"Yeah, Sara said you'd say about that. Actually she said you'd blush and run away if I tried it, so I think she'll be impressed. Wasn't even a no was it? Well, you should try it some time. With me I mean. I hear that if you score with the Wizard Tor you automatically get a prize? I'd love one of those cooling units, the ones that glow when your mood changes? Anyway, come with me. I know where Sara is and mom's with her. She'll want to see you, you're all she talks about practically. Sara, not mom. All that Heather she talks about is her great disappointment with her youngest child, at least when I'm around."

The walk was to a different room that Tor had never been to, on the other side of the house, water poured over a false stone wall at the back making the room about twenty degrees cooler than outside Tor bet, if a bit humid. Like how it was always cooler by the river. The case Tor had half forgotten followed him in. It had the look of purple rosewood and light golden pine, purple and gold, but in wood. Festive. Inside he needed to be careful not to take corners too fast or it could get stuck on the other side of the wall. It wasn't really there, a totally magic box, and like all of those it naturally wanted to float at the same height as the amulet, so the box was at his head level, just below really. The boy eyed it speculatively as they walked.

Heather Debri was wearing a shear gown that was nearly see

through and Sara was wearing flight leathers and still looked cooler. She had one of the new emotion tracking equalizers out, which Heather had been looking at enviously. The boy cleared his throat and both women looked up, smiles suddenly on their faces.

"Tor!" Sara said, jumping up like someone important had entered the room. He was tackled nearly instantly and kissed more warmly than he was comfortable with in front of her mother. Heather didn't blink, but the boy standing next to him winced.

"Ah, and here I was just asking him to get naked with me and he put me off. Nicely, even complimented my looks, very proper, but still, a bit mean to do that right in front of me, don't you think sis?" The kid shook his head sadly.

It made Tor tense up, since he hadn't intended to be rude at all. God this was all so complicated. What did he have to do, have sex with anyone that was halfway nice to him? He'd only just started doing anything like that at all and now it seemed like he was just walking from one potential disaster into the next.

He bowed to the boy and apologized, trying to be correct and all that. Sara pulled him up after a second and kissed him again. The boy just bowed back and smiled.

"Don't worry Tor, Kurt's an outrageous flirt with anyone not related to him. He nearly got Trice into bed when he was thirteen. Come to think of it he got her into bed at fourteen. That's why mom won't send him to a nice school like Lairdgren and he has to suffer away at Holden academy way up north. He wouldn't even be back right now but someone managed to get him flying gear. I blame Kris, but no one will tell me for sure." She pulled him down next to her protectively with a small glare for her brother.

Thinking about it Tor really couldn't complain too much. When Sara had met his younger brother, Timon, the boy had asked her to marry him. She'd been really polite about it and even asked him to send a message to her mother, treating it as a serious offer. It would have been a good match, if Timon hadn't been nine at the time. Ten now though. Fourteen was legal, so if she stayed available for a few more years he might even stand a chance. He was going to mention that, curious as to if his brother had followed through, rather than teasing, but Sara suddenly looked worried.

"Is there a problem? You've never visited alone before. Is something wrong?"

There was always something wrong with him wasn't there? This time it wasn't a problem at least, more like a request, he took a breath and dove in.

"So, I need a template. I'll give it back at the end of the week, but I just don't have one right now and really, making one would be

courting death for the next few months. Maybe longer. It's not permanent, but in the future I guess I have to learn to be a bit smarter about how I do things in regards to direct effect, you know? Do you have anything?" He held his breath. Would they trust him not to grab it and run? Did they have a reason to?

Heather shrugged.

"All yours are spread all over the kingdom at different manufacturing centers. All we have here is a Gamble cutter for decorative edgings. Would that do? I'd... like to come and see the events if that's all right? Forming contacts early can't hurt. Have you considered such testing for any other areas or is it only for builders?" The question was innocent, and said as if just indicating it was a thought, not a concern, but the fact was he hadn't considered that in any way. There were other subjects, weren't there?

Well, darn.

OK, could anyone help him with that? Probably. He'd ask. There was just so much to do. Even without building. He missed it, that feeling of actually being effective at something. Real life left him feeling disjointed and a little lost most of the time.

Heather promised to send the template for the Gamble cutter over the next day, early in the morning so they could get started without delay. Now Tor just had to find someone else to run it all. He'd forgotten he was supposed to be on vacation. When he mentioned this out loud Kurt smiled and touched his arm. He had his shield back on, a shield at least, but the boy didn't mean harm, even if the contact was unsettling.

"Alright, no need to beat around the bush. I'll do it for you. But only because I want to get closer to you. Can I stay at your house tonight? So I can be there bright and early in the morning?" Tor nearly said yes but Heather frowned and shook her head.

"I don't think so. You sir, are grounded, and you know it. No parties. No dates, and no sex until you learn to not get serving girls pregnant. You're lucky I'm giving you the run of the house. I should call you home and lock you in, or send you off to the country estate, but I don't want to deal with you that much right now." Looking at Tor the forty something woman sighed loudly, a sincere and long thing that got his attention at least. He knew the feeling, if not exactly, failing having a precocious young son yet himself.

Tor almost made a suggestion, about how he could watch Kurt so that he could work at something useful, but then he kept his mouth shut. Invite the boy over and he'd wake up with a visitor in his bed he was sure. He could find someone else.

"Hey, Sara, since, you know, you haven't gotten anyone pregnant lately, at least not that your mother knows about, would you like to

come stay over? If you're not needed here I mean? I should hit the palace with my idea, and make sure everything is alright there, but going places alone is less than my favorite thing. Plus we haven't really talked for a while, not alone." It was as pointed as he wanted to get in front of her mom. It wasn't like he had some big speech planned or important heart to heart talk, they should just cover some stuff. Spying mainly. But there was time for that. First the palace, then back to his place, in case Lyn came by. If no one was there to help her she might not call twice.

Sara rode beside him, he reconfigured the magic carriage for it, making it nearly tiny, the top still see through. It was slightly harder to drive, being off center, but it was doable and let her touch him when she wanted. It was nice. She pretty much kept contact with him for the whole ride, scooting closer so their legs touched cozily. The gate guard wasn't someone he knew, but did accept his word about who he was, with a truth device on, one of the gate guard ones. Same for Sara. It meant under the new rules that they didn't have to wait for someone to come and vouch for them, since they were both on the visitors list, speeding up gate traffic incredibly with the huge party coming up.

That reminded him of something. As soon as they got to the meeting that was going on, led by Connie, but attended by everyone, Tor stopped and didn't blurt out what he'd intended. He wanted to remind them to get him an invitation this year, so he wouldn't be locked out again like last time. If it happened twice it would be a tradition, and he'd never get to go. Well, he certainly wasn't wondering around the city this time, he mused nearly laughing, until he got a look at the Queen's face.

Connie... looked horrible. Drawn again and tired. The King too, now that he glanced that far up to check. Even sitting the man was taller than he was in these chairs. Had something new happened then?

Lairdgren was there and didn't seem too concerned, but that wasn't shocking. He was thousands of years old. No matter how bizarre or harsh something was, Burks had seen it, done it or lived it. Probably more than once. Tor would even hazard that at some point a Princess had sold him as a whore for amusement or to make a point.

No one was wearing black, not even an armband to show grief, so it wasn't a death at least. Not anyone close or an official anyway. Thank the universe for that. They asked him why he'd come, the King sounding sad when he spoke. Burks however nearly jumped at the chance to run the testing for the new project, smiling at Tor as if he'd done something right for a change. Richard gave a real, if weak and sad smile about the idea, but Connie didn't seem to respond at all. It was a good plan, but not enough to shake them from whatever

concerned them. It was just them in the room, all friends and no dignitaries, so shrugging, Tor simply asked.

Connie looked at him with tears in her eyes.

“Oh Tor... One of Karina's friends... was found dead this morning. We don't know how to tell her...”

It was a death? God, Ali? Had that situation with her being sold gone wrong? If so, it was his fault. He hadn't thought it would be lethal, but if that was the case, then in part it was his failure. The King continued.

“Not that I approved of her little group of friends, but It seems that the ring leader, Lillith Degray I think her name is? Murdered another of their group. A young lady named Yardley Principle. The Degray girl is in custody, Kolb's people got to her within moments having been patrolling the area, unfortunately a cutter had been used, a weapons grade one. Nothing could be done to save the poor thing.”

“Yardley? I... We only met once I think. She used a healing device to get rid of her acne and the scars from it. She was so happy... Why? Does anyone know?”

The King shook his head.

“No, but we mean to. It's nothing to worry you now, but Karina may need you and her other friends to lean on. This kind of thing is hard on youngsters. Hard on anyone, no matter how old, but after a time you begin to grow a little callused from the beatings of the world. I... it would be cowardly for us to have you tell her, could you send her home immediately? Please, don't give specifics, just tell her it's urgent. She'll respond to that.”

Tor stood suddenly, bowed without comment and grabbed Sara's hand as they left the room.

Fuck. Just fuck.

And not the good kind.

Chapter seven

It would take far too long for him to use the magic carriage in the crowded streets, and no matter how fast they went, Yardley wouldn't be coming back, so they used Not-flyers, his box following them still. Damn, he'd meant to give Heather and everyone some gifts. Equalizers and cooling plates just for their house. He pointed back distractedly and told Sara that was what was in the case. She nodded but didn't speak.

Right. Poor Yardley. Who were her people? Would anyone mourn her? He felt a knot in his stomach and kind of feared that he'd be doing that himself, even if they'd only seen each other once. What would Karina do? She'd been so down lately already...

"Right. Sara, Karina isn't to be alone now. Not even to go to the restroom. I don't care what we have to do, or if we have to face down Rich and Connie to do it. From now on we stay with her. I know I don't have any right to order anyone to do anything, but it feels right... I," can't use magic to fix it.

No device would. Dead was dead. Even if he could bring people back he wouldn't. How could you decide who was worthy or not? The world would end up with people elbow to elbow and frankly, as unlikely as the idea sounded, it sent a chill down his spine to think of it. Not just a creepy feeling, but real fear, like he was about to be killed.

Just from an absurd thought? He wouldn't be doing that though, even if he figured it out. That, he knew, was probably going to hurt later. Didn't he want his friends with him forever? He did, but it wasn't natural. He wasn't natural, but that wasn't the issue at the moment, now it was Karina.

Sara nodded to him, her short blond hair not moving much, while his long black locks waved in the wind annoying the heck out of him. He should have tied it up again. It looked ridiculous. Everything about him probably did. Not-flyers looked stupid. Who flew four inches above the ground instead of using their legs? Just him.

Well, and a few thousand other people now, but it looked odd.

When they got to the south gate they just turned off the Not-flyers and flew over the crowd, avoiding the sparkling jumpers, their patriotic streamers beneath them as they danced in the air. It was prettier now that the sky had slightly darkened, but there was no time for it. Sara goggled a bit at the spectacles and events near his house, but he just flew, fast and hard.

It took a minute to negotiate the door and the people in the foyer, mingling and waiting for dinner.

There in the midst of the crowd, looking lost and more than a little terrified, stood Lyn, her little light field in her right hand, cord wrapped so it wouldn't fall. Crud, he didn't have time for her now, but didn't want to lose her either. It was important that she get her chance. Important to him, and the kingdom too, most likely. He couldn't let this hurt that.

Spotting Collette he waved and got her to come over, walking quickly, seeing his obvious intensity. At the same time he drew Sara over to Lyn, taking a moment to make sure things happened correctly. Even if it was heavy handed.

“Collette! This is Lyn, she's a builder, but needs to go to school, can you get that worked out? Lairdgren. I'm paying for it, we won't bother with a scholarship... I'm sponsoring her directly. Get with the Count and her parents please? There's an emergency or I'd do it myself. Lyn? This is Collette. She's your... best friend, for the night at least. Sorry to be all rushed like this, Where's Karina?”

No one knew.

Right. The place was huge and the girl had legs. Inconvenient of her really. Tor tried his room first, wondering if Ali might have come already and been taken there. It made sense, being that Karina was kind of staying with him, sharing his room, when she slept at his house. He was dragging Sara along for moral support, not sure if that support was for Karina or him.

Screw it, Tor knew it was for him, which was low and made him feel weak. Still that was the truth, no denying it. If he could have avoided the whole thing he really might have. But he couldn't. His friend needed him.

They broke in to his bedroom without knocking, to find a scene that, at first, Tor's mind refused to understand. He stared for a bit, trying to make sense of it all, but nothing came for a long time, about ten seconds. He just froze. Sara did too at least, so it wasn't just him being a freak.

Trice was there, naked, and so was Ursala, which worked for him so far, though he hadn't seen Trice naked before. Rolph was having sex with someone on the bed, but the man was tied face down and grunting as if in pain. He had a gag in his mouth to keep things quiet. The girls stared at him first, wide eyed. Then Rolph turned and froze, still inside the man.

On the bed, tied to restraints that had sprung from the headboard, was Ridley.

Ah. Well.

Tor shrugged.

He didn't have time to play the hick right now. Rolph was screwing some guys behind? So be it. It wasn't his, and Ridley just

looked curious now, not in distress, so tied up or not, he wasn't being forced. That was fine in their sick little world. So be it.

"I need to find Karina. Anyone? It's... urgent. From the King's lips."

It got everyone to stop what they were doing and put on clothes at least. Urgent seemed to mean something in their world. The Prince tried asking, but Tor didn't answer, just shaking his head no. If he told Rolph, and he really wanted too, then he might slip and tell his sister out of concern or sympathy.

Godlings, this was all so screwed up.

They finally found her in a room on the top floor, alone with Ali, the short busty girl that seemed a little dumb, but pleasant enough. Karina was holding her and telling her it would all be fine. When she looked up her eyes were concerned and a little moist but not unhappy.

"Ali was afraid that Jerral was going to force her into being a prostitute. Lilli made her sign papers for it, so if I hadn't been actually buying her, or well Tor really, since he paid for everything, then that's probably what would have happened. Well, not with Jerral there, of course, but anyone else." Karina looked at the girl with a bit of affection, kind of like how you look at a slightly slow child that's trying really hard.

Ali sobbed a lot, her voice hiccupping out.

"But... Lilli said that the men were going to... do things to me, and that I wanted it, so I had to do it now. I wrote my name, and now I have to..." She cried loudly.

Crap. Alright, Tor decided, one thing at a time, they could all melt down later, right? He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, seeking control. It took more work than he'd have thought. A sudden rage burned at Lilli that Tor simply hadn't counted on at all. Taking a few seconds he forced relaxation and then spoke, trying to sound confident, rather than like he wanted to kill someone.

"Ali, Lilli was being bad, and did bad things, so some people that work for..." Tor almost said the King, which was true, or even Karina, also the case, but altered it. If the girl was going to flip out over all this, her old friend being arrested, better she just hate him, right? They weren't close, and hating Tor would never lead to treasonous speech. It couldn't.

"People that work for me, had to arrest her. She's in jail now. As to some contract, a forced signature isn't binding, not for anyone, ever. Meaning you don't have to do anything you don't want to. I won't let anyone make you." His voice suddenly sounded fierce and tough, which had to look ridiculous coming from him, but no one even cracked a smile. The crying girl sniffled and looked at him with very blue, dewy eyes.

“Really?” She said, her crying a little softer now. “I don't have to do things? If I don't want to? What if I want to?”

It was an odd question. Tor shrugged.

“That's all right then, as long as the other person,” he glanced at everyone else slightly, raising his shoulders at them. “Or people, want to do those things too. Then it's OK. But you don't have to. Not ever.”

He walked to Karina and gave her a hug and found Ali joining in, a bit awkwardly, but he moved to let her, her friend had been killed too and if Karina had to be watched, this girl would need it twice as much.

“Karina, I hate to do this, but you're needed at the palace, your father asked me to tell you specifically that it's urgent. I've been forbidden to tell you why. Please don't ask. We need to move now. Um, Bring Ali and... everyone. Get Bonita too. Collette and Petra can stay here and run things for now, please? They know where the money is and all that. Let's go.”

Ali couldn't fly, and neither, oddly enough, could Ridley. Or was it that odd really? When would he have learned? Tor had given him poison detectors for his family, but not flying rigs or shields. He should have given them shields at least. They'd been having a squabble with the Wards' and feared being poisoned, why, Tor didn't know, but it seemed to have been resolved, at least no one had stabbed anyone else at his house yet. Right, so shield for them as soon as possible, even though the danger had probably passed. He had on two and gave one to Ridley without explaining.

The man looked at him, concerned, recognizing what it was.

“Is there physical threat?” He spoke almost into Tor's ear as they walked, almost casually, as if asking when dinner was or if there were plans for later.

Tor shrugged and kept going.

“No, not now I don't think. Just get with me, or Trice, later and get shields and flying rigs for your family? Grab some weapons for you and you're parents to.” Outfitting his little sister with a full compliment seemed a little bit much.

Ridley didn't say anything after that at all, just dropping to the back of the group.

Tor pulled out the carriage amulet and marched to the front of the house, setting it up on the stage behind a rather good musical group that played string instruments, there were about ten of them. Not too bad, if he could judge things like that. He reformed the vehicle to make enough seats for everyone, and made it clear on top so that they could be seen.

Then he focused, just a little, using his own pattern exactly like he wasn't supposed to, but keeping the damage down, being careful,

making a glowing symbol appear under his left hand. It was pumpkin orange and a bit ugly, a stylized f, to indicate flying. Then he lifted off, going straight up to the cheers of the crowd. People treated it like it was a fire work, or another display.

Fine. He wished them the enjoyment of it.

Slipping the communications plate out of its little carry bag he passed it back to Rolph left handed, but he didn't know what it was at first, since all the other plates had been fixed in place. Ursala did the work for him, hitting the glowing palace sigil, the one that said "Capital" and making it turn blue. After that though, once Richard was talking, Rolph didn't hesitate.

"Dad, we're all flying in a craft Tor made, Karina and her friend Ali are with us. Countess Thorgood, Trice, Ridley Dens, Sara, Tor and I. We're almost there, could you let them know we're coming? This vehicle doesn't look like a transport at all. We're over the palace now. Um, it's purple."

Tor made the decent slow, and if it wasn't as smooth as some pilots, well, they generally weren't coming in on their first solo flight either, were they? Tor decided to keep that part to himself and strive for a smooth, slow action that looked professional. He got down into one of the bare patches the bigger normal palace transports had worn, just as Connie and Richard walked out quickly to meet them. They didn't keep everyone in the dark, simply explaining about Yardley Principle, and what they'd found out so far. Tor almost cried out for them to stop, knowing that Ali wouldn't be able to handle what they said very easily, but they didn't hesitate.

Karina just nodded stiffly.

"I... figured it must be something like that. She's been questioned? Lil... Lillith Degray?" The Princess stood straight and didn't look broken at all.

It was worse than that by far. Tor knew that aspect of being personally, he'd lived it once.

Karina was going to go find the one that caused her pain, and make her pay. Lethally.

Right.

Well, he'd back her, if that's what she needed to do. Even if he had to kill Lilli himself. The idea made him shake a little, but that didn't matter. What mattered was being there for his friend. Tor walked over to her, but didn't touch her. If she wanted to be touched she'd reach out to him. Clinging to an undersized bakers son wouldn't look all that regal. She just stood straight, head high, and eyes on fire with rage.

"What has she said?" The Princess barely moved, but the King laid it out clearly enough.

It wasn't complex, amongst all her other crimes, a fairly extensive theft and underage prostitution ring that Karina hadn't known about at all, the girl, who was in her mid twenty's not the sixteen she'd told everyone, had been selling women for years. Normally as private sex slaves, under contract as whores. It was illegal in several ways, but the girls she preyed on were usually not all that bright. Tor winced when the man said it, but Ali nodded. She knew who, and what, she was.

Probably meaning she was actually smarter than she thought.

Yardley's "crime" had been trying to keep Ali from being sold. They'd argued and Lilli wouldn't put up with another "traitor", what she called anyone who disagreed with her at all, so she killed her. The pieces at the end weren't big enough to save her. Kolb's people had tried, using one of Tor's healing amulets. Yardley was identifiable only because the head was left intact. Mainly. The girl's parents were calling for blood.

The King seemed of a mind to give it to them.

So was everyone else.

Tor kept his mouth shut. The idea made him shake with fear and rage and gave him a perverse desire to try and save the woman, but that wasn't sane and he knew it. The execution would have to wait for the trial, Karina murmured softly, her light freckles darker in the dim light of the courtyard for some reason. That or all the blood had rushed from her face.

His shield kicked in as she started to lash out, first at Ali, who was closest to her and either too worn out, or too stunned to run away. Tor jumped between them, the Princesses shield suddenly pounding against his, over and over. The strength of the blows was great, a lot more than seemed reasonable, the ground under him making dull, echoing thuds when he was hit. Count Ward had punched harder, but not much, and the man was at least four times the thin princesses weight. Everyone else backed away, Rolph dashing in to grab Ali, and pull her out of the way, shielding her with his own body, thankfully.

The attack went on longer than any Tor had seen or heard of, nearly a full hour of pummeling and blows raining down. She pulled weapons, but only a force lance and a cutter, so not too much else was effected. He was fine when they hit him, but if they hit the palace it would have done damage and the wall around the complex hadn't been rebuilt yet. So really, no hiding it, if it was done. He tried to keep her going after him with focus and precision. Tor could have taunted her into it, but he couldn't stomach that, not after her good friend died. Her girlfriend or lover. Kind of heroically even, trying to protect their other friend, who clearly couldn't stand up for herself. Even if Yardley had been too late to stop anything, if the sale had

really been happening.

Finally she went still, unmoving, not even panting somehow. Her look told him how confused she must have been and how close to death she'd worked herself. Her brain would be fried for a while, and the next day would hit like she'd spent the whole night drinking instead of pounding him. She'd also be depressed and probably cranky in the morning.

Got to love being a royal, Tor thought, wondering again what the benefits were exactly. Being rich? That was gold, not royalty. Being tall? OK, but was being able to reach the top shelf really worth it? For a split second Tor wondered what would happen if he took Karina and Nita away, say to the forest, and just left all this behind? They had another Princess after all, they didn't need this one. He couldn't protect her from life though, not and let her have one. No one could do that.

The Princess stared at him, so clearly confused that Tor almost cried.

"Tor... what, how..."

"Combat rage." The words came out easily and without rancor. No one really meant what they did in a combat rage. So far the only one that could really control it at all seemed to be him, for all the good that did. She looked down.

"I see. Are you hurt, did I... anyone?"

It was a noble effort on her part, after that long in, that deeply under, it was amazing she could remember to try and ask the right questions. Who was I fighting? Why? Did anyone get hurt? Do I need to apologize for my actions?

It was clear that Connie wanted to run to her, but she waited. A royal had to act with decorum after something like this, even if it wasn't fair. She had to show she was in control. But it was enough. Tor dropped his shield and after a few, slow thinking seconds, she did the same, so they could touch. Other people moved in slowly each taking a turn holding her. Ali looked like she wanted to, but was baffled, not knowing her place it seemed, or why her friend had attacked like that. Tor waved her over and told her it was all right, hoping that it really was.

She hugged her friend tightly then and clearly didn't want to move, at least until Karina chuckled and suggested they go someplace softer, so it wouldn't hurt as much when she fell down.

That turned out to be bed for her, and they all trooped off to her room. It was the first Tim he'd been in her space. Looking around Tor saw that her chamber was covered with hangings showing old battles and strange devices from history that his mind could barely understand. Some of them he'd seen before though, machines that

flew, like those of Austra. The shapes were different, but he got the idea rapidly enough. Products of "technology" rather than magic. Oddly on the far wall was a single tapestry that looked out of place for the room, a thick and durable woven thing that had a deep burgundy background with small black designs, diamonds, and a stylized rabbit wearing very Ancient style clothing. He had a funny hat too. Most hats were a little silly looking to Tor, but how was that one supposed to work with those ears? The light brown fur looked likely, but the eyes were an odd green color. Bunny's didn't have green eyes, did they? He'd always thought they were all black.

Karina was out faster than he expected. Then really, would he have lasted longer? After that? No, she needed to sleep and it was pretty much what had to happen now. When the light was turned off, he met everyone else in the outside hall.

"Ali... do you have parents or someone that's going to look for you tonight? We should be in touch if-" The question died on his lips as the girl hugged herself and shook her head.

"My dad, he... kicked me out two years ago... said I was too much work and didn't pull my weight. I tried, but... I was living with Lilli. I don't have anyone else. I..." Her eyes misted up, but Tor shook his head.

"You're with me now then. You can... be my assistant. Tonight though we need to stay with Kari, so no bad dreams scare her too much. Is that all right with you?" His voice could have sound patronizing using those words, or like he spoke to a child. Instead, by some miracle, he sounded reasonable and like he had a plan. Ali nodded gently but looked better somehow, less worried.

"In the morning someone will have to spell us. Rolph and Trice? No, Trice and Sara. Then at least one of you can, comfort her, if she needs it. Ridley and Alphonse later in the day? Bonita will want to come by too. Basically make sure she doesn't kill herself or go around killing other people for now. And... if she insists on running off, anywhere, I'm going with her. If anyone tries to stop us, if that's her choice... I'll..." Do what? Yell at them and cry? What could he do that wouldn't make things worse?

"What I'll do is... go anyway. With her. Alright?"

Oddly everyone but Sara nodded. Even the King and Queen.

"Me too. If there's leaving, I'm going along." It was a simple statement and probably meant that she could act as a spy for the King if need be, but that was alright. She could come, they all could as far as he was concerned. His point, if he even had one, was just that he wasn't abandoning his friend when things got hard for her. That was all.

For some reason Trice was standing beside him, her right hand in

his left. It didn't bother him, but it seemed odd. Really if anyone was going to feel the urge to hold his hand here, he would have expected Connie to, but her thoughts went to her child, where they belonged.

But didn't Trice have Ridley now? Or, really, probably the whole time they knew each other? It was alright, but seemed odd to him. So much did here. In a way he longed for the more innocent times of even two years before, when he was just a school boy and no one treated him as anything more. Back when everyone was pleased enough if he did his school work on time and managed a little extra credit now and again. No girls looked at him to do more than glare and the boys only glanced to make sure they didn't accidentally step on him.

Or even the times when he could hide in his work and not be a part of everything. Back when, if he just left no one really worried or cared, they only wanted him for his work. Was that different now? He didn't know, but it felt like it. Maybe people didn't love him, but they acted like it, they hugged him and held his hand and even made love to him, saying it was because they wanted to.

Nita wouldn't want him now, of course, not after Rolph had been with her. Tor couldn't compete with him, the Prince was just... incredible. Petra had hardly talked to him in days, so she probably had some boyfriend from home he didn't know about, or one of Kolb's people. She was one of them, so why wouldn't she? They all had more in common anyway. And Trice was... weird. She held his hand and didn't let go, as if they were together or something. Yeah, he'd called her his girlfriend, but what was the definition of that in their world, the noble world?

In his, it would mean that they'd most likely get married, but that clearly wasn't the case. Which was fine, her being a royal and all... a noble, Tor corrected after half a second of thinking about it.

Even that, he realized looking around, was different here. In his home village, anyone over six-six was a "royal", title or not. Here the King's family were the royals, the others with titles were nobles and there were layers and levels below them.

With him at the bottom.

Only that wasn't true, he reminded himself, as Burks had told him to.

Tor was only, what, two steps from Rolph or Karina? One if he took over as Count some day. And he was a Knight. A small, weak, and right now internally whiny one, but he had the title. Basically, for him it just meant doing what the King said and trying to protect people. It was as close as he could come to describing what he'd want to do right now. The protecting and helping people part.

Trice didn't let go of him when he went into Karina's room,

following instead. Well, the bed was big enough, and Ali took the outside anyway, so he snuggled in between Karina and Trice. She didn't try anything, she just hugged him, as if he was the one going through all the darkness here. It was nice, but Tor would be fine, in the end, he always was.

Even when he wasn't.

Eventually he fell asleep, only waking at about four when Burks tapped on the door gently, politely not popping his head in at least, but Tor was at the door before he realized it anyway, staring at the man.

"Something?" Tor asked, a shock still running through him from the sudden sound, fear tickled his mind, because it could be an emergency. And any emergency bad enough to wake him up for had to be horrible, didn't it?

"Nothing. It's just that I know you've been baking in the mornings, you and Karina. If you're going to go, you need to get on your way soon. I suggest you try the healing amulet on her first. It may not work, but until you try, you won't know." The Count spread his hands lightly, a gesture Tor had never seen before. It was basically just saying that what he'd said was just a suggestion, Tor guessed. Good enough.

He nodded and thanked the man, who was always a really good servant, showing up when you needed and leaving when you were about to do something awkward or embarrassing. Unless he couldn't. Then he did his task totally unperturbed. Tor would have to ask how many centuries that would take to kick in, that aplomb in any situation. He certainly didn't have it yet.

Trice had woken and blinked at him, her eyes puffy still and short blond hair with dark brown roots a little messy, kind of totally pressed down and matted on the left side.

Tor grabbed a healing amulet, the one around his neck, and woke up Karina handing it to her without warning, hoping it wouldn't hurt too bad. In this case she just sighed and looked up at him after a minute.

"Oh... yes. That's much better. I feel almost human again. So, the plan?"

Baking for the day and taking care of the remains of the Jerral situation, he whispered softly, lips almost to her ear. No complaints from her, just a nod. Ali woke up and looked scared for some reason. Sleepy still too. Karina reassured her with a hug.

"We need to get ready now Ali. Clean clothes and a bath, teeth and hair brushed. Someone will bring the right stuff for you, don't worry. I'll make sure of it. Tor will get you some magical clothes." The Princess handled her friend gently, and as if the plan had already been

set. The busty girl just grinned.

The clothing actually got handled by Trice, who had four sets on her. She grinned but didn't say anything about it. Tor nodded to her. Having extra all the time was starting to seem like a good plan. He'd have to copy it.

Ali spoke, sounding very young suddenly.

"Thanks Kari. You always were nice to me. What are we doing?" Her face actually got excited when she heard it was baking for the next week. That baffled Tor until they managed to escape the palace getting around the guards by using the carriage he'd made and flying past the wall, then taking it at low floating level to Debbie's, coming in through the south gate. True no one said they couldn't leave, but it was tiresome to deal with the Royal Guard all the time. They were good at their jobs, but that didn't mean they weren't also a giant pain in the rear. A common theme with them in fact.

That thought made Tor flash on the scene he'd seen with Ridley, Rolph and Trice. That whole thing was at least a bit messed up. Rolph and Trice being cousins, close enough they wouldn't be marrying, and what they were doing to Ridley... Sure, Ursala too, it had probably been her idea, perv that she was, but at least she wasn't related to anyone in that mix. It was confusing. Tor just had to assume it was more innocent than it looked. Rolph hadn't been having sex with Trice at least...

The day went quickly enough and Jerral just didn't show. Kolb's people all did and so did Davie, if a bit late. Well, he wasn't getting paid for the work either, so what could they say? He had a good reason though.

"I have Jerral locked up in my room at your palace Tor. I told my father that we kidnapped him and were going to beat him until he became a man, which, as you may imagine, dad was fine with. Didn't even ask why, or if I really meant it. I'm half tempted to feed him on hand pies and throw women at him for the whole week just to spite the bastard. Dad, not Jerral. But we've already planned a good solid beating for him every day this week. I get to go first today, after work here. You're up tomorrow for it Tor. We need to liberate Debbie for her turn later in the week. Kolb's going to help her with that." He laughed when he said it, so it sounded like a joke, but Tor wondered. He didn't think he could beat a person really. Even spanking a child seemed wrong to him. Even if they deserved it.

Tor solved the problem of the girls by taking them back to the palace before his run and fight practice after the mornings work. They went through the main gate, and no one yelled at him, until they got all the way into the main hallway.

What was yelled shocked him to his very core though. Not that it

was a bad thing...

"Court Jester!" A brightly colored dark skin woman that was so brown she looked almost a deep blue, standing maybe an inch taller than he was and who had brilliant red hair and pale blue eyes, both of which seemed natural, no matter how odd they were. She was lean and could run faster than most horses, he knew, having seen her do it. Her smile was glowing.

"You promised me rivers! Did you forget me? I would be sad at that..." She shook her head mournfully, playing with him.

Tor tilted his head to one side.

"Mom?" He said dryly, looking around playfully, as if searching for someone else. Then smiled at her and bowed.

"Oh... It's the other lady that nags at me to get my chores done." Tor grinned at her, not even having to look up, since they were about the same size.

"I not only didn't forget you, I had to make all your rivers twice, because the first ones were, um, "borrowed" and got lost. I have them back at my house, in my bedroom. Want to come with me? I have transportation that can get us there and back without going through the streets if you'd like to try it? I have the digging equipment I promised back then too. I..." He shrugged.

"Really I have no excuse. Everyone is busy, and I should have made time for your project like I said I would. I can only say that I'm truly sorry for not having gotten to work on it sooner." Tor bowed low and wondered if he should try for a full abasement. After all Mutta's people had been trying to reforest their great central desert for over a thousand years, and all they needed was clean water. He had ten rivers that would float above the ground and take pure water from the salt of their oceans, along with other gear for the project just sitting in the corner of his room in magical chests. Before he could get any lower Mutta grabbed him firmly by the shoulder and stood him upright, patting his arm gently.

"Ah, Court Jester! Don't concern yourself overly. You say three months, we of Afrak think thirty years. We are a patient people and in no great hurry. Besides, your Queen, Constance the fair? She told me of the tales of Tor and what you've been up too. I asked her to have them written up, people back home would find such stories fascinating! A tiny person like you battling an army of giants, and a man at that." Her teeth practically gleamed in her dark face.

It hit him then that he could do that, make teeth shine, skin darken or even change hair and eye color. It was only a matter of organizing how light reflected after all. He could do the work in about a day, even without ripping his pattern apart. He grinned and shook his head. He could write out the idea so he wouldn't forget later, but

for now he needed to focus on not working. Not building at least.

“Oh? “The Tales of Tor”? Is that an instructional book on how not to live your life then? I should read it, as awkward as that would be. I need all the help I can get.” Tor made a face that got the Ambassador to laugh loudly and pat his arm again.

“Truly I need to take you home to my village! You are the best part of coming here you know, always making me feel welcome and the days bright. We could marry you off to my youngest sister and then keep you for parties, pulling you out to caper and make merry. Do you still not sing? It would really round out your act you know. Or at least play an instrument. Everyone loves music.”

The idea wasn't a bad one. The learning to play an instrument part. Burks had said something about music hadn't he? He had no particular desire to be pulled out only for parties to dance about telling jokes. That felt just a little too close to what he did now for his comfort, even though it wasn't really true.

“Hmm. Well, I don't know if it would be proper for the Noram Ambassador to Afrak to caper and make merry at parties really. Maybe a few private functions? Really, I should learn your language first, at least what I can of it. Oh, and your customs to. I need to find a teacher for that, don't you think?”

Mutta blinked at him and then bent over laughing for a while.

“Oh, Jester! Would that your rulers had such wisdom as to send a beauty as yourself to my people! A warning though, with your talents they may be loath to ever let you go. I need to tell your Queen you said that! Do you think she would lend you to us, even for a few weeks? I promise that we won't really keep you. You can lift spirits with tales of magic rivers and flying men!” She clapped her hand joyfully at the idea.

Ah. Right.

Afrak was run by women almost exclusively. Men existed there, at least he thought so, but they were the home makers apparently, and did the low work, while women were the thinkers, planners and ruled in all things. Very different. Mutta kind of had a problem getting the idea that Tor, a man, might actually be able to do anything without being told to by a female. He shrugged.

“Ambassador Mutta... I... this isn't a joke. I really am the Noram Ambassador to your people, at least until the rivers are in place, and they really are in my room. I know it's hard for you to understand, me being male, but try to wrap your mind around it. As it is you keep accidentally insulting the King and really, he's in charge of the whole kingdom, not the Queen, as capable as she is in her own right. It's kind of why we call it a “kingdom”.” He remembered something she'd said last time.

"It had to be in your briefing packet!" His tone was wry and she chuckled again.

"So it was. But... Really, men in charge? What do women do then?"

Sighing Tor told her, which had her thinking he was joking again. Oh well.

"Still, why don't you teach me your language? Even if you only think I'm going to use it to tell jokes? After all, the worst that happens is that you steal me off to your court or whatever and I tell amusing stories everyone can understand, yes?" He kept his voice even and playful. She just couldn't get it and wouldn't just because he got frustrated with her. Besides other than that, she was nice.

The bright figure with her many colors bowed.

"The wisdom of the fool. Very well then Court Jester, I will teach you Afrak and you can come home with me. First, shall I let you lure me back to your room with the promise of magic rivers? Given your people I have no clue if that means you have a joke for me, or if you intend to try and get me into bed... I warn you though, my people take that kind of play seriously and if you wish to lay with me the price is your hand in marriage." She chuckled and Tor grinned again throwing her a small bow.

"Real rivers, I promise. You know though, it sounds like your ways might be a bit more like mine back home, in Two Bends. Still, this is the Capital of Noram, so you should try to do as they do here... That's a good line to get you into bed without marrying you, don't you think? It even makes sense. Wars start if you buck the customs of a place, especially as an Ambassador." He shook his head and looked down mournfully.

"You wouldn't want to do that would you? Well, nothing for it now, back to my room then!" Taking her hand he started walking away and to his surprise she followed easily. Laughing, but she didn't resist at all.

They didn't get a hundred feet towards the door when Burks called out to him though, getting him to stop with a smile. He liked the man, even if the whole thing with them being virtually the same person somehow was creepy. They waited for him to catch up, which he did at an easy, but efficient walk, not making a sound with his steps at all. Tor looked at his feet, but the soles looked like hard tanned leather, not soft. That was impressive now that he noticed it. It spoke of control over his every move that Tor couldn't even approach at all. Not yet. He made more noise even with padded cloth around his feet.

"Tor! Good to catch you, I was wondering if you could give me a ride to your event site? I could walk, but going through the streets

right now, this time of day, is near a lost cause.” He bowed to Mutta gracefully his eyes taking in her form completely but without a hint of judgment.

Then he said something in a flowing bit of language that Tor didn't track at all. Afrak probably. The woman's eyes went wide, but she didn't speak, instead she took both of them by the hand and moved to a long table that ran along a wall, only about a foot wide from front to back, made of a deep brown stained and finished wood. The work on it was light and elegant. A lot of stuff in the palace was though.

The Ambassador pulled a small, flat, woven bag of bright colors from under her robe on the right and started setting up a baffling array of things on the table in front of them.

Then she grabbed Tor's right hand and stabbed him with a needle, drawing a large, bright red, drop of blood. That wasn't enough for whatever strange ritual she had in mind, so she pulled some hair from his head and used a flat, tiny metal blade to cut off some skin and mixed it in one little jar, then added a green liquid to the mix, put a ceramic cap on the whole thing and shook vigorously. The only good part about the indignity was that she did the same to Burks, who suffered it in silence too, just waiting for her to find whatever she was looking for or finish invoking whatever magic she needed.

It took nearly five minutes of muttering and putting small strips of paper or possibly skin, in the liquid, then comparing them closely, but in the end she turned and bowed to them both, as if the ritual had made them special somehow?

Gods and all, Tor hoped they weren't married now. That would be... disturbing. Burks talked to her in another burst of language, which made her mouth open and work at first, then she clapped again in glee.

“You know, I can't understand a word either of you is saying, but if you want to keep talking, we could do it while going to my house? Mutta needs her rivers and I need to get to my daily running and then be beaten by giants for a while. Well, I don't need to be beaten, I haven't done anything wrong, but that's what's going to happen anyway, so I may as well accept it now.”

The Ambassador looked like the cat with all the cream as she packed up and allowed Tor to take her by the hand gently in order to lead her out while she jabbered at his grandfather. Finally, as they got outside she saw one of the transports and stopped talking.

“These fly? I heard... but they're so big! How much power does it take to keep them up? We don't fly in Afrak, well, some of our animal friends do, but the people stay on the ground.” Her voice was hesitant.

Tor set up the carriage they were using, shifting the color to look

official, which made the woman stop talking and start staring, unmoving. She finally touched it, pushed at the gold and cream colored carriage, the scroll work a little closer to the actual royal carriages this time, Tor thought, and after Burks showed her it was safe and had a top to it, even if invisible she climbed in, shaking.

“Tor, could you make the top opaque? I think that might be easier for the first trip.” Burks held her hand now, his face serene. Taking the hint Tor tried for a similar look, but added a smile to it.

The ride over was punctuated by gasps, but no crying out or begging to land, which showed a good bit of courage from the lady, since she was obviously terrified. He landed on the stage behind the performers, jugglers this time, who didn't miss a single beat as the carriage set down gently, or even when the incredibly exotic Ambassador stepped out.

In fact people cheered and stomped their feet on seeing her, so one of the jugglers signaled for them to all stand in the middle of the flying torches for a bit, realizing that a bit of color can't hurt no doubt. Tor wincing away from the fire obviously and comically, getting some hoots from the audience. He straightened and stuck his tongue out, fingers wiggling in his ears, then finally getting the field they were using just walked out of the star of fire being made without breaking the pattern. Burks followed him easily, but Mutta had to wait for the men and women to let her go, which they didn't want to do, because the crowd had more than tripled suddenly, with her there in the middle. She was just that exotic, and everyone had heard about her already. It was even fashionable to try and dye hair the same color as hers Tor had heard.

Of course.

Taking down the carriage was an event itself and caused a happy roar, as if they hadn't seen it before a dozen times. Well, right now almost anything would make the crowd happy. They'd come for that purpose and that always made things easier. Once inside Mutta took a good look at the place. Her head tilted and a smile curled on her lips.

“Court Jester? This is your house? A castle nicer than that of the Queen? How is that?” Her gaze scrapped the walls, the lovely decorations that looked a good bit more tasteful than the palace did, if what Varley had told him was right. No gaudy displays of wealth, past the polished stone, wood, and silk on the walls. The big staircase in the middle was carpeted all in red now. It had been stone earlier, but Collette took joy in changing things around, since it was so simple here.

“Oh, it's magic. Don't worry, it's not really here at all. It's like the carriage we came in, a little focus stone amulet. But if we turned it off right now all the things and people would end up in a jumbled pile on

the ground, which would be a big mess, so you'll have to trust me on that one."

Burks bowed to Mutta and made his way out to the little magic house that had been set up earlier by someone for the school testing. It was directly in back of the large house so that the noise from the festival wouldn't disturb anyone trying to get a scholarship.

Taking her hand again and walking slowly so her robes wouldn't trip her up, Tor led the Afrak woman up the stairs, the gaze of nearly twenty royals following them as they went. Well, she was certainly worth looking at, given her exotic coloration. The red hair alone, bright like a birds, not copper like Rolph's, but true red. Brighter than blood even. The dark skin looked like polished stone under the magic lights, dimmer in here than the sun outdoors.

At his door, which had his name on it, he pounded and then waited for a few seconds before entering.

"It's my room, in my house, but the last time I just walked in there were four nobles on my bed doing... stuff. Really, I think if I described it you may have to run away in shock. Then I'd have to find you again to deliver the rivers." Tor mock shivered.

"Giant hairy red butt." He said, fake fear in his voice.

It earned a big smile.

Inside the room he went right to the rivers and earth moving rigs, explaining which was which and how to set them up, activate and control them by tapping different sigils. She nodded along, looking at the bed several times. Finally he got it, the restraints used on Ridley were still there, attached to the headboard and the bed was unmade. Ooops. And he'd told her it was his bedroom too. How embarrassing. She didn't say anything but did give him a faintly wild eyed look.

Probably wondering if it was just polite to be tied up like that, and if there was any way to decline without being rude.

He handed her the amulets that let the boxes, decorated as lovely wooden chests with brass work, in a golden colored wood, follow her. That made her stop in the door as they rose into the air and came along.

"Are these... are they truly the desalination systems? I... Can we set one up? I know that it's an imposition, but..."

But the idea of her "Court Jester" even having something like that wasn't something she could grasp, not really.

Tor got the gist of what she meant. Well, why not? He wanted to learn Afrak anyway. He'd grab some of Kolb's people and... Karina, and make an outing of it the next day. The fighting instructors had set one up before, and it should take less than a day to make a loop. They could raise it somehow and use it as a decoration for the big party the following evening maybe? No one else would be expecting a

decorative river, would they?

He was later for his run than he liked and didn't find Kolb until after he finished, nearly three hours after he should have. The huge bald man thought it the height of rudeness to make anyone wait, Tor knew, so he wasn't surprised when he held out his large hand for Tor's shield, then set three of his largest men after him, making Tor start unarmed again. The fight was brutal until he managed to get one of the big blades from the men and started swatting at the weak points in the armor at their knees. It wasn't very effective really and they killed him after a while, then interspersed drinking water with going after each of the giants three on one as well, Tor with only a stick about his own height for that part. It was the very first time that Tor had ever worked with the combat giants, rather than just being their target.

He tried to focus and cooperate with them, remembering what had worked on him in the past. It was a little strange, but no one seemed to think he sucked at it totally. He even made a single kill himself. The huge mean looking Baron. The other two men managed to pin him to the ground while Tor pantomimed hitting him in the head with his stick until, laughing more than a little, the Baron admitted that even his hard skull wouldn't have lasted through the beating.

When Kolb came over he had Petra with him. Along with a serious look that was caught halfway between bland and giddy. Tor didn't trust it at all.

"Petra, if you would?" Was all he said.

Tor half expected her to start beating him, but instead she had an analysis of all their performances ready. All of them. It was excruciating in its detail, down to the times his feet had been slightly off position and when he dropped his blade tip while leaping back a few times. At first he felt bad about how he'd done, but he realized that everyone else was getting the same treatment.

Right...

This was part of how they got so good. Focusing Tor memorized what was said, then moved off to the side to try and practice it all.

After a few minutes Petra came over and watched, calling out suggestions which he followed pretty well, at least she didn't scream at him for doing it all wrong. Finally she stopped him and handed back his shield.

"Good. Keep that up and you may actually make a fighter some day." Then she hugged him. It wasn't the typical "warrior's hug" being too soft and smooth, but it was nice.

Looking down and feeling about five feet high, he blushed.

"Petra? If you don't have anything to do later, would you like to spend the night with me? And Karina and her friend Ali?" He was

going to spend the time with the Princess, but having Petra there would be fun too. She nodded.

"I'd love too, just remember, Karina and I are related, distantly and we're both girls, but you know, doing anything too close would be... off putting."

Ah.

That hadn't really been what he'd had in mind, but he nodded seriously. Who knew what they'd get up to? He got it set up without hesitating. The communications device was nice for that. He actually got to talk to Karina and make plans, which made her sound a lot happier. Ali got on and jabbered at him about her day, as if they didn't have all evening for that. She even told him about the baking parts. Tor smiled and listened, making appropriate noises until the King himself intervened, sending the girls off on an errand. It seemed the plan, instead of cossetting the girls was going to be keeping them busy and working for the time being.

It made sense. It was avoiding the pain of the situation with Yardley, but they couldn't do anything about that. Sitting around and crying wouldn't make them any better either, keeping them busy would be no worse. That and making sure they weren't left alone at all. Not that Karina would kill herself, thank all things good in the world. No, but she might torture Lilli to death. Even without reading her field Tor could feel the ideas coming off of her. They were strong and starting to influence the world around her with their intensity. If the field for it got too powerful, she'd do it. That or someone else would. But that would be cheating Yardley's people of their own vengeance and Lillith Degray of justice. Everyone deserved that. Even an insane monster.

What is it Davie had said? They could put her on trial first, find her guilty, and then kill her? It seemed a pretty good plan to Tor at the moment.

Organizing everything took time and Tor was supposed to try and eat at the formal diner each night at his house if he could. People expected it apparently. Something about him being the host and all that.

The service was a bit weak, compared to the palace, but they had more guests and fewer servants, all of whom were pulling out the stops to make the meals special and unique each night. The food was good, at least as good as the King's table would be without Laura, the head cook that ran their kitchens before she died. Part of it was that the facilities at his house were simply better, and the kitchens bigger. The other part was all these people the Queen had sent them. If they weren't professionals he couldn't tell. They were flawless most of the time and the few small errors he noticed were fixed so fast it was like

magic, even though they used skill for it. That and cleverness.

The seating arrangements were a bit confusing, they had several full Counts and countesses each night, usually coming at the last minute, which meant that things had to be changed so that they were near Tor at the head of the table. Collette played hostess, so she was next to him the whole time, no matter what, but he had a lot of close friends that he wanted near him at table, but who ended up halfway down. Tonight he had Rolph to his right, as if Tor were the King or something, which made him smile, feeling more like he should have been working in the kitchens himself than up front. Across from the Prince sat Karina. The seating was boy-girl after that, so Burks sat next to her with Bonita on his left, as his date. She kept smiling and touching his arm which half filled Tor with panic.

After all, he doubted many people in the world could compete with a good looking, fantastic looking, he admitted to himself, three thousand year old man in bed. But... if she liked him and he liked her back, well... Burks was a sitting Count and wouldn't die. That meant Bonita could be a Countess for the rest of her life if they married. It hurt a little thinking of it, but it would be best for her. Shouldn't he want that for his friend? Not liking it at all Tor decided to investigate the idea later. Even if it meant losing her for himself, he had to try, right?

Ali was next to the Prince, and to her left was Count Ross and his wife, the sitting Countess. If they minded being sat next to a sixteen year old girl that had basically been a whore and a thief for the last several years, they didn't show it. Then, Rolph saved the day on that point rather gallantly, when Count Ross, clearly meaning no harm, asked after what Ali did.

The Prince stepped in nodding.

"She's currently Master Tor's ward and personal assistant. In the next term she'll be attending Lairdgren school, one of the finest academies. She's to study domestic management I believe."

From across the table Burks nodded, it was his school after all, so for him to chime in wasn't only not rude, it was expected.

"That's right. The arrangements were made today. One of the twenty slots left open for the Capital. The competition is fierce this year. We also have several promising building talents thanks to the new testing Tor devised and arranged. Special scholarships from the County Lairdgren Special Fund. That's what I like to call Tor's account with the kingdoms treasury." The man smoothly held up his right hand and looked at the Countess Ross with a charming smile.

"He volunteered the funds for that. His idea in fact. However Ali is going as Tor's ward. I believe he's has already petitioned the King and Queen to adopt her formally himself, which will make her a

Counserina, what is it, twelfth?" The Count lied smoothly, as if it were a preplanned speech.

Either incredible skill on his part, or it really was planned.

Well, Tor wasn't planning to have sex with her, so why not? Besides it made Karina glow suddenly, the happiest look he'd seen on her face in weeks and Ali, Alissa he decided, if she was to be a noble, nearly clapped her hands, stopping just before she made a scene. He couldn't bring himself to disappoint her then, could he? He nodded to her.

"Thirteenth. More specifically I plan the formal presentation on Thursday. Count Lairdgren offered as well by the way, but I won out in the end, since this will put her in line for Lairdgren. We all have great expectations for Alissa." He didn't say any more, because there was a stirring at the far end of the hall. Nothing bad he saw, just some musicians coming in. They were strolling all over the city, paid for the task of making the whole place sound bright and cheery after all. These were the first to brave the "scary wizards house", so that worked to their credit in Tor's mind.

Like he was scary? Ridiculous.

They played well, the tunes tripping from their fingers with clear long practice and skill greater than the vast majority the city had seen in the last few days. Really they were so good it was surprising they weren't playing in the palace.

Then Tor got it.

These weren't professional players at all. They were party crashers. He recognized two of them as they moved closer to his end of the table, Dorgal Sorvee, and his fellow bully, Marco. The others were all of the same look. Smug.

Great. Just what he needed.

More problems.

Chapter eight

That these guys had actual talent kind of amazed him.

Dorgal had never seemed like more than an irritant, full of bluster, insults and vague intimidations, usually, but not always with Marko standing by to add bulk to the matter. Neither was huge, merchant class, not true royals, Tor reminded himself, his stomach lurching a little.

They could mock him, but if they tried to hurt him now, he could fight back, or even call them names without worrying about being kicked out of school. It was his house after all. Besides, he outranked them both now. It didn't leave him feeling any better, but it was true, and he had friends here that would back him up if need be.

Both played violins, a light dancing tune that brought to mind the sparkle of sunlight on green leaves after a rain. It really wasn't fair, he decided, for these men he really didn't care for to be that good at something. He noticed one of the music instructors standing behind them, fingering a guitar delicately, adding the whisper of falling rain to the whole thing.

That... was strange, because Tor knew him to be a Royal Guard. If he'd wanted to come in, he and his people could have just asked and sat with them rather than make pretense. The man was good though. Possibly the best Tor had ever heard, not that music was a strength of his. The other player was a woman, tall, plain, and at least as gifted as any of the others, also on guitar. The counterpoint she played to the rain sounds had to take timing on an epic scale. The men wore black clothing, light and airy, silk it looked like, but she wore a deep blue gown. It had slits to let the breeze in, but this house was cool inside, not cold, but the heat outdoors was oppressive, so the contrast had to leave her a little chill.

She looked to be in her late twenties, but it wasn't a hard lived look. More like the young and springing type of woman, whose life wasn't so hard as to wear them down before their time. Without waiting, or asking, they moved to one side and kept playing, and for some reason everyone else ignored them, except to occasionally tap along on the table or move their head in time to the music.

They played without a real break for the whole meal, stopping only after the dessert dishes were pulled away by the servants, dressed in green like they did at the palace. From there people kind of broke up a bit, most of them leaving the room without hesitation, wanting to get to the festivities. The first small fireworks display would be that night. It was the same device for all of them, but it had six settings on it. Bonita had taken personal charge of the three pound piece of tan

glassy rock with its glowing sigils. All the same in look — simple line birds — like what children drew in school, with three lines above each. The size got larger from top to bottom, making the idea clear enough. Tonight's would look like normal fireworks, he thought. The only difference was they wouldn't set anything on fire. In a dust dry place like the Capital that was an important factor. They normally wouldn't risk such a display this time of year at all, even for the King.

Seeing that they were free to speak to now, Dorgal and his friends approached with large smiles and instruments in hand. Tor fought the urge to turn on his shield, knowing he was already safe and so was everyone else in the group. Except Ali. She didn't have a shield at all. Not even a temperature equalizer. That would have to be fixed fast.

Standing Tor moved towards the group, a smile on his face, and slid his body between them and the girl with enough subtlety that he really doubted anyone noticed, except Burks, and maybe Rolph, who knew the score better than most here did. He decided for trying to start out with kindness. After all, he'd done business with Dorgal in the last year, and as far as he could tell the man had actually dealt with him fairly and without bugging him about anything. Maybe that would count for something, if only a little.

To Dorgal, being merchant born, it apparently meant a lot, if the look on his face counted for anything. Tor started speaking, his voice gentle, saying the obvious first, giving credit where it was due.

"You all played beautifully. Masterfully even. Thank you for coming." There, he decided, if Dorgal wasn't at least polite now...

"It was the least we could do Tor! Our fortunes are all made because of you. I... honestly it surprised me when you gave us the earth moving equipment contract so openly, like a true friend, after how I treated you all that time. Then making sure Meredith here was taken care of, even though you weren't available to marry her yourself... I'm not ashamed to say I cried when that shipment of goods came from you for us. We'd been looking at some way to show our thanks and friendship for some time, when Backus here found us a few days ago and suggested we do this, well, we've practiced nearly non-stop. Do you really think we did all right?"

Everyone agreed with Tor's take, even Burks.

"Very well indeed. If you don't mind, we'll drag you to the palace tomorrow for the King's party, outdoor work, but the air's dry, so it won't damage your instruments. It's not the same as getting an invitation to the party yourselves, but if you distinguish yourselves you can build contacts there. Worth doing."

Still wondering where the trap was, Tor made introductions all the way around. The only joy in it really was that when Rolph, the affable boy everyone always liked from school was revealed to be

Prince Alphonse Cordes himself, he thought Dorgal was going to pass out. Then it was probably just shock at the change up, because Dorgal had always been kind to his tall friend. It wasn't like he had to eat sour over it now or anything.

The fireworks started then and everyone piled outside to sit and watch the sky above the city light up. It was pretty enough Tor decided, but hoped the following nights would be more impressive. Dorgal came to him then and for some reason patted him on the back.

"Not bad for a little baker boy from the back woods."

That was what he always called him, to taunt him, "the little baker boy". This time it sounded different. If not kind, at least not a jibe. A hand rested on his back for a long while.

"I'm not good at this, but I apologize for," he sucked in air loudly as the sky lit again, booms just before the sparks flared. "Basically for being a prick to you. I was wrong the whole time. I hope we can be friends in the future?"

It sounded contrite. Maybe it even was, but two years of looking over his shoulder daily and dreading going outside alone wasn't going to be easily washed away with a few words. Still... If Dorgal freaking Sorvee was going to give it a try, shouldn't he be at least as willing? It was hard but Tor nodded.

"Alright. Friends then." There, he'd said it. No going back now. There were no debts between friends, even new ones and that meant setting aside old baggage too. He doubted he'd do it perfectly, but he'd just committed to really trying, hadn't he?

Rolph came and stood beside him, on the other side, which made Dorgal's hand on his back jolt, a jump, well hidden, but real. The Prince seemed happy, not taking his eyes off the sky. He spoke just loudly enough to be heard over the oohhs and ahhs of the crowd.

"Good. I missed having you as a real friend Dorg. I don't know what came between us, but let's put that in the past too? If you two can get along, maybe there's hope for the world after all?"

When the fireworks ended Dorgal asked them out for drinks, even offering to pay. Rolph accepted immediately but Tor yawned a little and begged off. He didn't drink, but that wasn't why he didn't go.

"I have to be up at four." He said simply.

Rolph nodded, knowing what was going on, but the news surprised Dorgal.

"Really? During a festival week? Why on earth would you do that?"

"Oh, I'm working mornings, at a bakery in town. It's a tradition."

Dorgal laughed and laughed, sounding almost as if he were drunk already. He laughed even harder when Rolph told him it was true. Sticking out his tongue, then smiling a bit, Tor went to bed, pulling

Petra, Karina and Ali along. He cuddled with them, but didn't do anything more, since Ali was possibly going to be his daughter soon.

That wouldn't be proper at all.

The morning came gods awful early, and Tor felt like he hadn't slept at all. He had, but it wasn't enough, his body ached and felt stiff, probably from all the extra running and beatings he'd been getting, so he stretched before climbing into the shower. Petra joined him, still sleepy but looking cute about it. Tor figured he just looked tired.

"To save water. Don't want it to run out, do we?"

Since it wasn't possible, Tor took it as a joke. What they did next took a lot longer than either would have taken in the shower alone, but was totally worth it. When he'd just finished with Petra, still in front of her on his knees, she giggled and moved to the left, only to be replaced by a tall thin Princess that was going to make them late, he opined. She stared into his eyes meaningfully.

"Work quickly then? Talking won't get us there any sooner will it?" Her voice held a chuckle.

Her hair was soft between her legs, a dark copper red that spun light out from it in near gold for some reason, as it came from the window. People could see in, but he doubted anyone would be watching overly. If they were, that was their problem. Or pleasure.

He worked as quickly as he could, his tongue getting a little sore already, but not wanting to be pulling in with the first of the early revelers either. Grasping his head she started grinding her sex against his tongue hard. It wasn't the most pleasant thing ever, but she started trembling and spasmed under his mouth a half dozen times, which made her seem more relaxed. Looking up he realized that Petra had stayed to watch the whole thing and so had Ali.

Tor stared at the girl.

"Hey you!" He said, making shewing motions with his left hand, still between the Princess' spread legs.

"You shouldn't be watching things like this, at least with me involved. What kind of father does that?" He sounded very serious but everyone else chuckled at him. Well it seemed like an afterthought when Ali did it, but she managed when the others did, like she knew to laugh, but not what the joke was. If so, that made two of them.

Karina looked pleased at any rate.

"See Ali! You're not all alone in the world after all. I told you so. We'll get out so you can shower and get ready. Ten minutes though, we really do need to hurry, it's almost light."

They all had to work hard to make up for lost time when they got in, and send Ali off with David Derring to get a load of amulets for the shop, since they were actually selling out of a lot of things. Tor was going to run out at this rate, except for the free ones that he had Ali

hand out, standing in front with a small hand basket. They were for later that night, lights that made a person glow in different colors with the tap of a sigil. A large nimbus of light surrounding them.

It was a brighter light than the ones he'd made the year before, meant to be more festive and fun than decorative for royals. Less tasteful, but more interesting and even useful, since after the festivities were done they could be used as lights inside a dwelling or carried at night to let people see. The white light on them was easily bright enough to be used inside a house and they should last a while, helping people save a bit on candle and lamp oil costs. He had a lot of them. Actually so many he wasn't really sure how he'd gotten them done while working on everything else, two and a half large cases full. That would be nearly three thousand of them he thought. Enough to light the whole city for the festival.

Tor wasn't certain, but he thought he might have actually done them all at once. One batch. Of a nearly novel build. He didn't remember doing it at all.

When the next set of Kolb's guards came Tor went straight to the palace with Karina, but sent Alissa to the festival area to continue passing out the free amulets. She wore one to demonstrate, picking a brilliant pink color that was easy to see even during the day. At least she had outside the shop. No doubt it would be popular, because while the girl may not be bright, she was cute, and men liked big breasts. The thought was honest and true, but made his stomach turn a little.

Not the pretty with big breasts part. Adopted daughter to be or not, that was just true. It was his thinking of her as not being bright. If she was lacking something, it was up to him to help her find it, mentally accepting her as being dull witted could help make her that way and influence how he treated her. He needed to fix that. Fast.

Kolb had a few people ready to go when they got to the event site near his house, flying in to save time, an Afrak Ambassador in the rear. She was still not having an easy time with flying, but Trice had come, and was letting her clasp her left arm as hard as she wanted. It didn't hurt after all.

The loop they flew, drawn on the weapons instructors map, started and ended on the far side of the palace, the river actually balancing on the top of the city wall. It took five of the ten control stones to make the curve, but only four more to set the river in place. Two into the Capital and two out. Once it was ready they all piled in the carriage, the top being made clear, so that the dark skinned lady could see how it all worked. She helped set half the stones with her own hands and got to hit the activation sigil standing on a cliff above the ocean so the tide would never reach it. The single tentative flick of

a finger sent a roar of water through the air, the sound moving away as the whole thing flowed onward. The almost clear tube of water about five feet over the shore hung steadily and didn't look like it was moving at all, even though the water was rushing very fast inside it. Something over fifty miles per hour. The whole thing was vast though, about four hundred feet in diameter. It should work, to start with.

It had to travel close to three hundred miles to get to the Capital, so they had hours to spare now in getting back. They even knew it had been set up correctly, because if it hadn't been, the water wouldn't have flown at all. That was a safety feature Tor had put in when he remade them. Looking at the stream above her, the normally happy Mutta sat down... and started crying.

It had a smile with it, but was just as loud as what Trice always did when she cut loose. Higher pitched too, Mutta's being shorter did that, he thought. It was odd, because the short dark woman normally managed an almost manly tenor when speaking.

"Court Jester! There is a river in the air! I hit that small decorative light, a flame within stone, and pure water flows from the sea at my command! The desert shall have water, it shall have life! For a thousand years we have tried and failed, but now it will happen!" Still crying and smiling she yelled and danced, pulling him around with her. It was goofy and undignified, but then, as she'd said more than once, she wasn't a real Ambassador.

Tor could kind of relate to that idea.

They ate a nice basket lunch under the shade of some trees, the food good if plain, hand pies from Debbie's for dessert. Karina pointed out that Tor made them himself, which was only partially right. Box had made the peach, you could tell because the consistency in size and shape was lower. His were a more even brown and slightly flakier too.

Sure, he was bragging a little, but no one called him on it, so he may not have been going way over the top. The combat giants acted impressed and so did Trice. Karina had seen him make thousands of the things in the last few days and didn't blink at the idea, but Mutta just nodded, a very matter of fact thing.

"You will make some woman a wonderful husband someday Court Jester. Keeping her home neat and tidy, raising her children and making sure good and nourishing food is on the table at the end of each hard day. Many women will offer your mother many plants and seeds for you. Even the rarest of silk goats and already planted acres of land. Ha!" She laughed suddenly, shockingly, as if just realizing something.

"And get the best of the bargain if they win! Eternally young and lovely, never dying or slowing with age. There is not enough wealth in

all the lands for a husband like that. Add your kind nature and soul and..." She looked around, seeing baffled glances.

Apparently, in Afrak, people didn't keep many secrets. Not at all. She explained how she'd tested Tor's blood against Count Lairdgren's and found that they were both ancients. That they were the Green man himself. Her words confused people, so she went over it and then doubled back. Finally Kolb rubbed his head looking at the tiny woman skeptically.

"Tor's... been alive for thousands of years?"

Tor stuck his tongue out at the weapons instructor, truly lost as to what else to do.

"Obviously not. Come on, you've known me for years and seen me get older. I'm only eighteen."

Karina didn't let it go at that though. Mainly clarifying for the others.

"But you're going to live that long, unless you get yourself killed? And Burks Lairdgren has done it already, right?"

Shrugging Tor nodded, it really was something like that. Mutta smiled and agreed happily.

"Yes, and they are the same person. The Court Jester is the Court Jester, and the Count is the Count, but save a tiny difference, you would find more separation between identical twins, they are the same man. Like clones, only not, since Tor was simply born, the pattern carrying true. It's happened before, with the Gray lady. Legend says her daughter is her too, with no difference at all. So it is here. It's most exciting, isn't it?"

Perhaps it was to one like Mutta. Everyone else stared at him suddenly like he was a freak. Wrong somehow. Which was pretty much true. People weren't meant to live that long, were they? No one spoke to him after that, except Mutta, who didn't have a problem making noises at him. Finally, just so everyone would have a reason to ignore him, he started getting her to teach him words and phrases in Afrak. It was an easy language once she slowed it down for him and he could get things committed to memory. They kept working on it as he drove, with her describing things in both languages, so he could get the meaning. Tree, shoe, girl, boy, rock, sleeve, up, down, in and out.

It wasn't possible to drive and focus completely like he should, but he managed to get most of it the first time, shamelessly asking for correction when he messed up. It wouldn't matter if he looked stupid, not with everyone staring at him when they thought he wasn't looking.

He was still him after all.

It wasn't like them knowing this made him any different. Did they

hate him now that they knew he was some weird kind of freak? Even Trice rode looking out the window, not trying to even tease him about the “make a wonderful husband” cracks. Mutta hadn't meant them that way though, did she?

It wasn't a joke to her, she just thought he'd be good in that role. It sounded a little boring to him, but it would probably leave him time to work on building at least. Maybe someone in her country wouldn't care if he was different?

Tor kind of wanted to crawl into bed and sleep then, early or not, but had to go to the party later, so just sat alone in his room and waited. Then he remembered that he didn't have an invitation. Last time he'd gotten to the gate of the King's palace with Collette Coltrass next to him, sitting with Count Thomson and his own sister, and been turned away. It had hurt at the time, more because it had ruined Collette's evening. But the reason had been that no one had thought to issue him an invitation. Was the same thing about to happen again? Lying back on his bed he drifted off for a bit. Well, nothing for it now. Sure, he could call up the King or Queen, but what good would that do? It was probably too late for him to get an invitation at all. He'd wanted to ask, but got side tracked, it was when he'd heard about Yardley, so yeah, that took his attention at the time.

Shaking himself hard Tor stood up and got ready anyway. He was a Knight of the realm, they said, a noble by birth, and a friend of the King himself. They didn't have to let him in at the gate, but he had to try and go. No matter what. Even if it meant dragging himself home in shame again. Paying close attention he dressed himself in a very nice outfit of black velvet and silk, a silver and moonstone belt and soft sued boots. At least that's what it looked like. He put it away with a single tap and showered, re-shaving carefully, because coming to any party dripping blood from your face would be embarrassing. This was supposed to be one of the biggest of the year, only Noram day was a bigger deal, so that held doubly or triply so. Then he tied his hair back with a truth amulet and loaded himself down as if going to battle. He hid a second set of items in his pocket, just in case. The rest would handle itself, wouldn't it?

Or not.

At least this year he wasn't dumb enough to try and bring someone else to be turned away if it happened, choosing to go alone, driving carefully through the crowded street in his much reduced carriage, recoloring it to look like it was made of faintly glowing purple glass. It was about a quarter the size of a normal one pulled by a horse, but had the same ball like rounded shape, with a faint pattern of dark looking scrolled glass work in it. People stared, but after days of these things giving free rides around the town no one just stood in

the way gawking any more. Kids and adults waved to him, so he smiled and put his own hand up. Tor might as well be kind, he figured, since he'd probably be seeing these people again in a few minutes.

He had a gift that he made, a little device that the King might like, he thought, even if he didn't need it. It was just a decoration really, Something to pass the time. The image of a little dragon that would sit on his shoulder and react a little to his moods and thoughts. A fake pet that didn't eat or make messes. The device wasn't as complex as Trice's arm, but had a feedback mechanism that could make it seem alive, a bit. It was in a well decorated, he hoped at least, wooden box, with a delicate inlay of glowing white. The whole thing was magic, so anything could have been chosen but this had a, classy was probably too ambitious, nice was a better word choice, feel about it. He hadn't brought anything else this time.

Really he didn't expect to be let in at all.

When he pulled up the gate guard looked at the vehicle and nodded, recognizing him instantly for once, even greeting him by name and with a gentle smile, but couldn't let him in without the invitation. Tor just shrugged and heaved a sigh.

"Well, you know, it's a tradition now, nothing we can do about it." Twice did make it a tradition, didn't it? He shook his head slowly, trying not to look miserable.

Well, what could he do then?

Follow the rest of the new annual pattern?

There was a line waiting, so he got out of the way, put his miniature transport away, and stood until he saw a familiar carriage. A nice black wood one. Walking up he knocked gently on the door until Count Thomson popped his head out, a polite, but questioning look on his face.

"Hi Tovey. No invitation again for some reason. Here..." Tor handed the amulet to him causing the box to try and float into place.

Hidden from sight at first, a small dark haired head duck around, she looked lovely, wearing a velvet gown of green and deeper green, it worked with her light skin and black hair. Darker skin than his, but still his mother's child and not a freak of nature like he was. Terlee. His older sister. She spoke softly but in the home tongue, which was always faster than Noram standard by about half.

"S'torrance? J'g'ot'n wastha? Not be goin? He'dar! I'm na goin eiter if'n they don h's'Tor! S'right?"

He shrugged, but spoke in the Capital tongue, that being where they were.

"No invitation again, you might as well go though. At least this time I don't think it's actually all that pointed at me. Say, I'm working

mornings at a bakery in town again this year, Tovey knows the one, you two met me and Collette there to come here last time? Come see me? It'll be fun."

Then he had to get out of the way, so that the driver didn't run over his foot as he pulled forward. Sighing Tor chuckled. At least this year he had his own party to go to, kind of. He just used the carriage, setting it up on the walkway next to the repaired stone section of wall, and flew straight up and over, a trip that had taken nearly an hour and a half on the ground done in the few minutes. When he got in to his house there were people wondering around, but no one really doing much of anything fun. They drank and kind of moped in the front room. The Warden people were working and having more fun by far. Everyone had seen the events and while music was nice and the drinks free, all the nobles felt a little left out, not being important enough for the King's big party.

Screw that.

Tor walked up to a familiar group of people, not knowing their names and started ushering them outside.

"It's a party, not a funeral! Dance, drink if your foolish enough to, go down the waterfalls. Heck, I'm going right now, who's coming?" He said it loudly and kept inviting people on the way, so he had a group of fifty naked royals and at least as many real people from the city following him through the rain tunnel, calling out suggestions as to what they should call this part of it. Most were variations of female sexual parts, but Tor laughed and took a cute noble girl he didn't recognize at all, who looked about thirteen, by the hand and led her up the stairs. At the top he pointed her to one of the slides, a fun twisty one that didn't go overly fast, and gestured for her to go first.

She looked nervous though.

"Um, I'm scared. Will you go down with me?" That got people to hoot drunkenly, even though it meant they had to lay next to each other naked for the trip down, she was about his height at least, so it didn't look that bad in the dusty twilight. Well... he considered and then nodded. Why not? It wasn't having sex with her and she might be older than he thought. Or younger. He'd keep it clean.

They rode down, both screaming and yelling the whole way, holding hands, laughing and making a spectacle of themselves. Then they went again. At the top he ended up trading partners, a tall boy, as naked as everyone else, drunkly asked if he could be next. The guy wasn't a boy really, but a young looking adult noble who kept trying to grab Tor's groin on the way down. Laughing, he slapped the man's hands. With good humor the man didn't say anything at the bottom after they stopped in the water he just kissed Tor on the cheek and bounded away.

That was off-putting, but he recovered quickly and dressed again, clothing getting wet from his skin, to look into food and drink.

It was there, ready to go thanks to the Ward people and all their hard work, so Tor cast around and found a band that was just resting and eating themselves and bribed them to start playing happy songs immediately and then got more people to come back with him from the milling crowd. One of the Warden women started dancing, a shimmying dance that looked awfully seductive and called to Tor to join her. He didn't know the dance, and looked ridiculous, awkward and he suspected like a small child aping adult behavior, but other people joined in, giving him the anonymity of the crowd. Most were taller than he was so after about five minutes he was nearly invisible. It left him feeling more at ease at least.

His night went on like that, moving from event to event, getting people to try night jumping, the brilliant purple and gold streaming and sparking lights going nearly constantly after a while making the whole night brighter and happier. Then he took on all comers at shield combat, letting the little kids win, the women win if they promised him a kiss, and the men... he did his best against, winning most of the time since he knew the system and wasn't half drunk. Sure, not all the women were cute, most weren't but they were happy, and that was the important part.

He found an adventurous group of young men and women, about half nobles, to help him surround the city with the multicolored glow units. Even giving them away a few were left. A few of them had flying gear, so they didn't have to scale the wall or anything, making it all much faster. By placing them right under the river on the wall it made it glow, the light carrying down the tube of clear water a good ways for some reason. They decided to use all purple and in about two hours the whole thing lit up. It made a ring of pure purple light around the whole capital. It was vast. Sure, he'd never see the light units after the festival, but he wasn't supposed to anyway, so that would be just fine.

By one in the morning there were about three hundred drunk people dancing in the night, glowing people drawing others like moths to a candle.

Bonita wasn't there, so he set off the fireworks himself, the sky lighting brightly, the display much bigger tonight, because he skipped one level. It was Rich's actual birthday celebration after all. People screamed and yelled a few even made love under the exploding sky or floated in the water of the waterfall slide, a huge area that held over a hundred easily, so it wouldn't hurt their necks to look up. He didn't go to bed at all, but he did go in at about three-thirty and clean up for the mornings work.

The streets were still crowded when he went in, and for once he had to wait for Debbie at the door for a long while. Box wasn't there at all. She looked a bit tired and lonely when she saw him. More than a bit.

"I look like your sister? I suppose you couldn't just close your eyes and pretend I don't? Just this once?" The words felt hopeless, but Tor shrugged and nodded.

Why not? She was his friend. If she wanted him that badly, he could manage. She wasn't his sister, if nothing else and if he started thinking of Terlee halfway through, that wasn't her problem, but his.

Amazingly she didn't look much like Terlee at all with the lights off, and his mind stayed focus on what they did, her hands and mouth on him greedily as if he were some prize, or like he'd back out halfway through if she didn't keep him constantly enthused.

They used the small room in back with a hard cot in it. Last year he'd slept there, not having anywhere in the city to go. This year it was more fun. It wasn't until he kissed her, tasted her mouth, that he realized she was more than a little in her cups. Well, people did that during parties. They even did this, had questionable sex with people they probably shouldn't at them too.

It was another tradition, wasn't it?

After they finished, laughing, they both cleaned up out back, stripping down to wash, it was less awkward than Tor had thought, she was still pleased enough that they'd done it, giving him odd looks as if she wanted to do it again. Maybe they would?

She wasn't as good as most of the royal women at the whole thing, but it had still felt nice, and he knew she liked him as a person. Besides, being good at sex was like anything else, you got better with attention to detail and practice. Which kind of demonstrated why the nobles were all so good at it. They practiced a lot.

Tor started to feel guilty, but let go of it quickly. What if she got pregnant? Supposedly that couldn't happen at all with him, and really, once past the Terlee looking thing, she had everything he wanted in a woman. She was smart, pretty, and hard working. Kind and generous, if in a merchantly fashion that somehow always led to them making even more money.

The work was harder to keep up with since all the helpers were late, but then the crowd was too, which evened things out a lot, not really starting to come in until noon by tradition. Karina showed up at ten looking embarrassed, but Ali seemed pleased. She told him how everything had gone at the King's party and how everyone had cheered when the river started glowing purple to honor the King. Burks had taken Bonita as his date, and Rolph got Collette in, Petra had gone alone and looked for him, her position and rank getting her

in with no problem.

“It was so much fun! I got to dress fancy and eat good food and men danced with me and asked me to have sex with them, but I put them off, because Karina said I shouldn't be too easy until I get adopted, so that people will understand my position and not think I'm a street walker. I can see that, I guess. Counts don't marry street walkers do they? I mean outside of stories? So that's a good plan, don't you think?”

On the good side, her chattering meant no one else had to, since getting a word in was nearly impossible until she ran down. Debbie gave them all hand pies to eat at eleven, since no one was coming in yet. Davie dragged himself in, looking hung over about that time. He mumbled sorry, but got right to work.

Box actually walked in about ten seconds before Terlee, who'd dressed in Two Bends style, backwoods blah, had her hair pulled back in a plain fashion, kind of like he did and walked into the still reeling man when he suddenly stopped, his worn leather shoe's catching on the wooden floor, he half spun, pulling the much smaller girl down on top of him as he fell.

“Sorry Debbie.” He said, trying to help her up.

“Tripped...” The look he gave her was hard and then he shook his head fuzzily. Same hair, same general build, smaller and a little thinner, but even the face had enough similarities that Box could have been her brother without any problem at all.

“It's not problem. I came to see my brother? Torrance?”

Debbie walked out and stared openly at the other woman for a while, long enough that it became uncomfortable.

With a soft sigh, she nodded firmly.

“Would you be Terlee? Tor's mentioned you a few times. Seems to feel we look a bit alike. If so I should take it as a compliment, you're gorgeous.” The look she gave him was apologetic.

“Sorry I doubted you Tor.”

It was a simple statement, one that no one else got. That was fine, now that he saw them side by side he saw the differences, not the similarities anyway. He smiled and then went to give his sister a hug.

“Right, so, everyone, this is my sister, Tamerlane Baker-” Tor stopped when his sister held out her left hand. It had a large and glittering ring on the correct finger Tor noticed nearly instantly.

“Tamerlane Thomson now. You should visit home more Tor. Totally missed my wedding and why? So you could fight with some assassins? Silly reason you know. Didn't even send a gift. Not even a note?” She shook her head sadly, but Tor picked her up into a big hug, making a whooping sound.

“Congratulations!” The wedding had been planned for a year out

from the betrothal, but it was close, he wondered why they'd rushed it for a minute then swallowed. Oh. He looked down but didn't check her field, it wasn't his business. He did kiss her cheek, which made her blush.

So she'd need baby stuff, probably a full kitchen set up, well, her servants would... he didn't know what else. Tovey had nice houses already so that wasn't needful... Right, magic clothing, that was useful. Even Kolb had grabbed one of those for each of his people. As soon as Tor reminded him it was part of the new secret groups allowance, getting things from him when they wanted.

"Alright then, so everybody, my sister Tamerlane, Countess Thomson. This mountain you ran into and hugged already is Debbie's brother Box, don't worry, I'm sure he enjoyed it. Debbie is my good friend, and owns the bakery and the magic device shop through the door there, where we'll go in a minute. Kari here — have you met?"

Terlee looked at the girl and shook her head gently.

"I don't think so."

Karina dimpled and winked, "Oh sure we have! Last night even. Though a few other times too. I'm usually dressed nicer, tend to be at parties with the royal family..." The look on her face was the kind used to lead a person to an obvious conclusion.

"Oh! Princess Karina! Kari? I see. Good to see you working. Mom's always going on about how growing up royal can spoil a child forever, but your brother seemed all right when we've met. This will hearten her greatly to hear."

As if he'd just introduced a coworker she switched her attention to Ali almost immediately. The girl curtsied and laughed.

"I'm your niece!" She said, with a cheery tone.

"S'wha?" Terlee said reverting instantly.

Tor nodded and explained, then dropped into home speech and gave the whole story quickly.

"So, Grandpa set me up, probably knowing that it was a good idea. It's not official yet, but if you'd treat her like family, it would be good, no matter what happens. She feels so all alone right now."

Terlee didn't wait, running over to the girl and giving her a familial hug.

"Welcome to the family Alissa! You're all coming to dinner at my house tonight." She announced.

"Can't sis, sorry, I have to get with the King about some things. Could we do it tomorrow night? I can give you these two for the evening though, if you're interested. If not that's fine too, I'm sure—" Terlee shook her head and frowned at him her face managing to be playful even if only he got it.

"They're family Tor, of course they can come. Alissa, Karina,

please plan on staying the night. Tor, everyone else will be by soon no doubt, do I send them here or, where?"

Everyone else?

The whole family? More, they'd all gotten to go to the King's party the night before, except the littlest ones. They were in Two Bends with Taler and his family, his oldest brother. Who had apparently decided to not have anything to do with all the noble nonsense at all. So the youngest here was Timon, who liked to be called Weasel now, if that hadn't changed in the last year, half year, since he'd seen him. That wasn't too bad, six months. He'd have to get by and see the others soon though. The littlest wouldn't even recognize him anymore he bet.

"My house, um, by the river, palace looking thing? Near a mountain of waterfalls? Can't really miss it, only place out there like it. I don't know when I'll be in tonight, dinner is at nine though, early tomorrow I'll be here again."

It wasn't very clear, but it was about the best he could manage on short notice.

Before she left he grabbed a basket and let her pick out anything she wanted from the store next door, asking Debbie to write up a bill for it. That way the gift would be from him, not the store itself. Terlee hesitated and finally picked one thing, blushing, a new bed. Smiling Tor asked for the basket and started loading it up with one of everything and two of a few, so Tovey could have one too. A bunch of lights as well. Everyone not blind needed light after all, as he was still far more acutely aware than he would have been half a year before. Terlee blushed at all the gifts, but took them. They were family, so she had to, and really, it wasn't like it put him out or anything, even paying retail for them.

"There, now, I'll see you in a few days, tops. Alright?"

She ducked her head as if she were sixteen again and still a shy and retiring flower, instead of the nearly confident Countess she'd become. Ali was thrilled though and wanted to go buy something for her, as a visiting gift. It seemed reasonable to Tor, but he didn't know the rules for things like that. Karina did and wrinkled her nose at him.

"I'll take her around this afternoon to look for things. Newlyweds, so the rule is for things useful to the home or bedroom. You gave her one of those excellent beds, so... Really Tor, I'm almost certain you don't want to know what I'm thinking.... But Ali's your daughter, or nearly, so it should come out of her allowance. I get five gold a month."

Ah. Tor had more than that at the store, just from the previous days sales even after Terlee's gifts. He handed the coins over to his daughter to be, and decided that thinking of her as the short busty girl

had to go as well. She had a cute face, and wasn't over tall, but then he didn't even know her age. He kept thinking sixteen, but didn't know for certain, Tor had never questioned his initial assumption on that score, and that was based on Karina's age more than anything.

Tor asked, which made her look at him nervously.

"Um, thirteen, I think. Maybe fourteen, I'm not really sure. I left home at eleven, I remember that. We just happened to be here then. I... I...Alissa isn't my real name." The words came out afraid, almost a sob.

Tor looked at her and tilted his head just a bit.

"Oh? What is it?" Ali was as fine a name as any if she liked it, but this seemed important to her. A sound came from the back, Davie coming out with a tray of hand pies for the shop, the ones for Tor having been cooling for hours.

"Gretchen." She said softly staring at the tall boy. "My real name is Gretchen Derring."

Tor spun as the tray of hand pies David had been holding, a large flat metal sheet, tumbled to the floor with a loud clang. Hand pies, berry by the red smears nor all over the floor. A shame, they smelled really good, Tor noticed. The nearly seven foot tall Countier stared at her, not moving, not even breathing for a few moments.

"Gretchen? I... didn't recognize you. Do... do you remember me?" He spoke softly, his voice gentle and calm. As if she was deranged or something.

Ali, Gretchen, nodded.

"I remember it all. Everything. You're my brother Davie. I didn't recognize you either, until I heard the name, you got so tall. Way taller than... him. I knew Jerral when I saw him, which is why I wouldn't, you know, have sex with him. Didn't want to. He didn't know me though. Couldn't see past the breasts I think. I used to be so flat." Her voice had gone shocky and toneless, her face pale and emotionless until that broke suddenly.

"I won't go back David. I can't. If you try to make me I'll..." She didn't say what she'd do, but it didn't matter.

David walked over slowly and picked her up into a brotherly hug.

"Damn straight you're not! You're going to be adopted by Tor and be Alissa Baker and anyone that says different can face me over it. I won't let him hurt you now! I was just a boy then, I should have stopped him, somehow, even if it meant dying, but he always locked me in that damn cage. If he tries that shit again, I'll kill him. If we can get Jerral away from him, then we're all free. Except Heidi, but I don't know if we can help her now."

David's eyes got moist, which didn't go with his new huge warrior look very well. Karina looked concerned, scared, and suddenly defiant.

But she didn't speak. Box just started to clean up the mess the hand pies left on the floor, scraping them up onto the metal tray using another one as a broom. It worked, more or less.

That... the whole thing seemed way too coincidental to him. What were the odds? Was it a trick, or... It was possible that it had to do with magic of some kind. Maybe even his own, which was a scary thought. By nature he ordered reality around him a little, without even meaning too. Everyone did, of course, but as focused as he was most of the time, the results might just be a lot further reaching for him. Then again, did it matter? She was going to be his daughter, his family. His grandfather had said so, and he'd agreed. Terlee had accepted her based only on that. If someone, anyone, tried to hurt her, royal or not, they'd have to kill him first to do it. He said this quietly, making a point of looking her right in the eyes.

Tor didn't explain to Debbie, she'd been right there after all, but he did ask her and Box not to say anything, to anyone, about it. Then he loaded everyone into a carriage, and after changing it to look official, in cream and gold, shaped almost identically to a real one, headed to the palace. It was a risk, sure, but one he was willing to take, because if he was going to steal a Counts daughter and make it stick, he needed both the King and Queen on his side.

They all changed in the carriage, dressing in identical black clothing, mainly because no one had the time or energy to think of anything else. It was just plain black canvas and looked like the military uniform more or less. That was fine. They weren't going to win style points. They got in fast, Tor feeling edgy and angry, not knowing why, but he was. Like something was about to go very wrong.

Down each hallway, Karina in the lead, it being her house, Tor half expected to run into Count Derring, standing there, ready to take his daughter back to his country estate. If that happened Tor was going to challenge the man to a duel. Right then and there. For existing probably. He didn't know of any real reason, other than he was so mean to his own children that they preferred death to his punishments, or being under his power.

That was enough, wasn't it?

The King and Queen were alone, thankfully, and Tor nodded, and started speaking while the others bowed, Karina gave a bow too, but Tor was too busy. The discussion was hard, the royals thinking that the kids were telling tales to avoid an merely unpleasant parent, but not truly abused for some reason. Tor pulled the truth detector from around his neck and handed it to Davie turned on, the one from his hair went to Ali.

Richard spread his hands then and nodded, his face suddenly a lot

more serious, "Please, continue."

There were lies told by each, but when they dug, instead of finding mountains turned into mole hills, they found it was a lot worse than either one of them wanted to say. Ali was crying as hard as he'd ever seen anyone and David's face turned to stone or may as well have. Some of the things...

Tor almost had to flee the room.

But couldn't.

If he was standing with them, he had to be willing to know it all, didn't he? If it was just abuse, just rape, Tor could have let justice take its course and hidden Ali away, being content to protect her and let the King deal with the rest. This was so much worse his mind couldn't even find a shape to it.

Then it got worse than that. It took an act of will for Tor not to simply vomit on the cold stone floor.

Richard looked at them all and shook his head sadly, it clearly affected him.

"I... Legally there's nothing I can do. He did all this on Derring soil? It makes it legal there then, at the time he did it. A Count in his county has total power and right on his side. He can't even be chastised for it openly. Even as barbaric and evil as this is, if I took the Kings Army in to deal with it, every Count in the land would rise against me. It strikes at the most fundamental of their rights." He sighed.

"Worse, as his child we're legally bound to return you now that we know who you are. Otherwise it could be construed as the crown taking hostages. I... I'm so sorry."

The Queen cried and so did Karina, Davie looked down and didn't move. Ali had never stopped crying.

Right. Crap. What could he do?

Tor frantically searched for something, considered merely finding Count Derring and killing him, even if it meant his own death, then took a deep breath and... smiled.

The King winced.

Tor could see that. The look had to seem insane. Like Tor intended to go to war. He decided to keep that option as a backup plan though. Something else had come to mind first.

"I... see. Well then, I'll just go and um, take her back then, right? Um, I have an errand to run first, is that OK do you think? Kind of an outstanding thing, so I should really get to it. Rivers to put up in Afrak? You OK'd it and everything, so it's kind of... official, made me the Ambassador and all that, months ago even. Still, I've her brother with us to chaperon and I'm not really anyone important, so it can't be misconstrued as anything but a pleasure trip for her, can it? Just as

soon as that's done, snap, right back she goes. Back to her father. Hey... question though... If she's of age and, um, married, then... she should stay with her husband right? I mean, that just makes sense, right? And the Queen could act as proxy for her mother? I mean if something were to come up? Her mom seemed nice the one time I met her. I'm sure she wouldn't mind. Not at all in fact."

Tor was ready to fight his way out if he had to, and just wished that he'd gotten a shield on the girl first. He started to move everyone towards the door when Burks stepped forward from the back of the room. Tor hadn't even realized he was there at all. He was busily eating a sandwich.

"How old is she?" He asked, his voice calm and even. Then he took another bite as if to say this wasn't really a problem at all.

David grimaced.

"Fourteen on Aue twelfth. Until then..."

The King smiled slowly.

"Until then we haven't seen any of you. You weren't here. Sorry about the missing party invitation Tor, we actually did send one, but it didn't seem to make it to you for some strange reason. I do hope that after you're done being angry with us you'll come visit, on say, Aue thirteenth? Bring the new wife perhaps?"

Tor nodded and said nothing.

They needed to move now.

Chapter nine

They were half way to Tor's house, flying fast when he realized something that they'd all forgotten for a bit. Maybe it was nothing, they didn't need Ali for the trial against Lilli did they? The answer that came was simple.

"Fucking hell!" Karina banged her fist angrily on the back of Tor's seat.

"Damn it craping fuck shit... fuck!" It was a little scary and Tor wasn't sure she wasn't about to go into combat rage, that or have some kind of seizure. The pounding grew stronger and stronger, until finally Ali whimpered.

Panting filled the back seat, and everyone went silent for a while. David finally suggested they land before talking about it again. That seemed a reasonable and intelligent plan, one that Tor should have come up with on his own. Get out of the potentially dangerous situation before chatting about anything sensitive? Check. It made sense and further, prevented Tor from painfully splatting into the side of a mountain that wasn't even really there. That would just be embarrassing, crashing into a mountain that he'd built himself. They got down and in the building before anyone said anything or more than glanced at them. Tor didn't speak until they hit the top of the stairs.

They couldn't let Lilli go free, but someone had to be there with a back up complaint just in case the murder accusation fell through. That would take Jerral and Ali. Karina started to hit things again, causing Tor to put up his hand and ask for details as to how the whole thing would work. It got the Princess to stop and talk at least.

The process wasn't that hard, the Council of Counts would meet and Ali would be questioned. Normally that would be that. The only problem would be that Count Derring would be there, and if she was recognized, he could pull her out and back home faster than anyone would even notice. They weren't allowed to sit in, not even Karina. Rolph could, as the heir, but he had no reason to stand up for Ali in particular. Other than it might be her best hope. Other than the fact that Tor had no doubt that if he knew what was going on, his friend would fight to the death to protect the girl.

Prince or not.

Anyone thinking otherwise didn't really know the man at all.

So it all hinged on Ali not being identifiable as Gretchen Derring? Rolph had done a credible alteration using hair and skin dyes. But the face had still been his and Tor had recognized him the second he opened his mouth to laugh. No, that wouldn't work, unless he made a

device that turned Alissa into someone else. That he could do, with work. At least enough to make her look and sound like someone else. But it would probably kill him to try right now. At least if he was going to do it well.

That wouldn't stop him if it was the only way. Not with what that monster had done, was still doing, to his other children. Tor had to kind of block it all out, what he'd heard, to stay sane. As it was, if he could have done it without just making the whole thing worse, he would have killed the man himself. Pop up and use an explosive device to rip him apart in the bath or something, to assure no shield would be in use. So there would be nightmares and ghosts? That would be for him to deal with, not Ali. Not David or Jerral. Tor would suffer that for them and count the cost low.

OK. So that wouldn't work. What else could he do?

"Karina? I need to know everything about this case and how it's going to be handled, can you find out for me? If I do it myself it will look funny. If you do it, well, you're involved, why shouldn't you?"

The words got him a nod, one that wasn't subdued, but was efficient and practical. She left immediately. For his part Tor took Alissa and David to his room. They could hide there. Until the trial Count Derring had no reason to think his runaway daughter was even alive, right? Even if he was briefed on the case, which seemed likely, all that would be said was a girl called Alissa was involved. It might even have her age as older than it actually was. So there was that.

Meals could be brought here while he arranged... something.

What, he had no clue. Stupid royal intrigue? A complex plot within a plot with something stupid wrapped in the middle? If he tried that Ali would be back in her father's clutches before morning, he needed to stick to something far more clever.

Like the truth.

Tor sat on the bed, Alissa softly crying next to him, her brother holding her and rocking gently. Crossing his legs he dropped into the deepest state he could and maintain awareness and control. He didn't hand himself over to his deepest being this time, but stood balanced on a fine edge in the darkness of his mind, and tried to hold the whole situation in place. It squirmed to slip away, to ease into something else, something more pleasant, but he didn't let it. It was his mind, and this was too important to ignore, uncomfortable or not.

It came to him slowly then.

He had a plan, take Ali to Afrak for about a month. Tor had reason to go and really, he knew, if he wanted to take a few women or girls with him, no one in royal society would think twice. It turned his stomach a bit, but if Tor had been having sex with Ali, even knowing her real age, most of the high society people wouldn't have done more

than twitter behind their hands. Thirteen was nearly legal after all and birth dates were easily enough misplaced at times... So the only obstacle was the trial of Lillith Degray.

Yardley needed justice.

No, that wasn't right.

The thin, dun colored girl was dead. Justice didn't do her any good at all. Her people needed vengeance, not justice. It was the kingdom that needed justice, no one else. The trial was really about ensuring that, if he, or anyone else, was ever falsely accused of a crime, they could rest assured that a real effort would be made to uncover that fact. That was the ultimate point of justice, wasn't it? Reassuring people in general? It was a good point, but this case would already be done in secret, not in normal channels. That almost had to happen.

The Council of Counts wasn't called in for murder trials normally, Karina caused it to go to that level. Whatever her involvement turned out to be, it wouldn't be spread to the person in the street. If it had been her killing Yardley they would have let her walk. Heck, then it would have been legal and there wouldn't be a trial at all. The idea kind of terrified him for a moment. It was a bad plan to let any person or group have that kind of power over others. It led to people like Count Derring.

But...

If the Counts were involved, and there was an investigation, then Smythe of Westend should be in charge, or at least able to take charge? That was it, wasn't it? The key was there, if Tor could exploit it well enough. Smythe was a lot of things, Tor had learned.

Famous for not being corruptible. Willing to die to protect the kingdom... Felt carriages lent stateliness to events and proceedings.

Slow, slow carriages. Ah.

Tor opened his eyes, not dropping the state of mind he was in, but bobbing closer to his normal surface state anyway. It was a response to seeing, he knew. It increased the activity in the brain no matter how deep you were inside yourself. Tor looked at the other two and smiled.

"Alright. I need for Ali to hide here for a few days. David I need you to get with Kolb in secret and ready a protective detail for Afrak. People that can work and keep their mouths shut. So everyone you know. Um... See if you can get your younger brother enrolled to study with Kolb? Tell your dad it's a great honor and will turn him into a real man or whatever will work. Tell him that... Princess Karina is paying for it. I'll cover the real costs. Apprentice fees or whatever. She'll back it though. Family after all." He nodded at the boy absently and tilted his head.

“Ali, for now, no matter what the reason, don't leave this room. Everyone will think I'm keeping you here for sex, but, well, let them. We'll dress you in scanty clothes and have the Ward people bring your food. Sorry, it's going to be a bit boring, but...”

Ali, finally, smiled, “I'm going to be your lover? And you're going to marry me? OK.” She said simply.

At least Tor got now that she wasn't really vapid, she was just young. Davie raised an eyebrow but Tor shook his head.

“No, you're going to pretend we're lovers. I don't sleep with under aged girls. For one thing, if I tried Davie and Prince Alphonse would both show up and kick my behind. For real too, I'm not just saying that. Possibly with a small army of giants in tow, so let's avoid that, right? It won't be hard though, I don't think. It's a festival after all. People expect raunchy behavior, right?”

That handled, Tor started on the next part of his plan, which required figuring out the key to Smythe's heart. He couldn't be bribed, and threatening him would be ridiculous. Once you chop off a man's hand, anything more would probably just push him to destruction. Beyond that really, the man was half ready to die anyway.

No, Tor would have to simply appeal to his rationality and hope. Still, could he get him to come to dinner? They weren't exactly friends, were they? But, wasn't Tor still working for him? Apprentice super-secret useless note taker or something? He'd need to clear the Afrak trip with him anyway. It made sense. He was the boss after all, Tor couldn't really just go haring off on his own without permission.

Honestly he should have been checking in already anyway. Kind of rude of him not too.

Oops.

He penned a note quickly and sealed it, putting a bloody fingerprint across the fold. It was a sign he knew, of the most official business. It was how Ward had sent his declaration of war and his withdrawal of it. It should get Smythe's attention he hoped. Now he just had to get it into his hands. Delivering it himself was an option, of course, but if he was supposed to be upset about the snubbing at the party, it would look a bit strange if he kept showing up at the palace gate. He sat trying to work out how to get it there when the answer walked in the door.

Trice, leading Rolph and Ridley in, all laughing merrily.

They seemed happy, and in a party like mood, not drunk or even tipsy yet though, which was good, because sober would work better for what they needed to do. Trice was on Ridley's arm, her right linked through his left, a cozy looking thing that pushed her breast against his arm more than a little. Tor felt a stab of jealousy. Lucky Ridley. He was good looking and tall, well, short for a noble, but ten

inches taller than Tor, maybe a full foot, both things Trice liked.

Remembering the scene from the other day Tor winced. Yeah, apparently Rolph liked that too. Eek. Different rules, he tried to remember, smiling at them all warmly.

“Shut the door please, we need to talk. Now.” He said, his voice a little stern.

They all looked down guiltily, Ridley even blushed and Rolph didn't look at him at all, his eyes on the far wall at a forty degree angle. Trice bit her lip, as if suddenly remembering that he was a freak. That wasn't important now, they could hate him later if they wanted, or think him even stranger than they did. He sat them all down on the bed, where they kept a good distance between each other, and acted like he was going to scold them or something. Before he could even start to explain Rolph started talking.

“Tor... I know that what you saw the other day must have shocked you, I don't want you to think that...” He didn't finish the thought.

It was maddening when people did that, he realized, stopped halfway through an idea. The Prince didn't want Tor to think what? That he was having sex on his bed? That they were going to do it again if he hadn't been there? That they often left the bed unmade and kinky restraints out where the Afrak Ambassador could see them?

Finally Trice finished it.

“He doesn't want you to think he's going to try and have sex with you too. That's what he's getting at.”

Tor blinked and looked at Trice, then Rolph. He included Ridley in the look too, remembering the scene. Uhg.

“Darn straight he's not!” Tor said vehemently enough that they all winced. Rolph suddenly looked miserable, sad, as if Tor had insulted him.

“He's... huge. His manhood too. If anyone's doing that to anyone here I'm doing him. God, he'd rupture something in me.” It was a joke, meant to take them as funny, he hoped.

Everyone stared at him for a few seconds, shocked and not sure if they should laugh or not, until Alissa spoke quietly.

“Not really. With a little practice you'll stretch and then it doesn't even hurt that much, as long as you use enough lubricant. It just takes some getting used to is all. I can show you how, if you want?” She looked him dead in the eye as if it were a normal topic. For some reason the whole thing made him laugh. It was a manic laugh, not all together there, but real enough. Everyone else did it too after a while.

“So, you're not, mad at me, or scared or anything?” Rolph said, his voice happier but still subdued.

Tor shrugged.

“Scared of what? That you'll hold me down and force me? No. I know you well enough to know that you'd never do that. The worst I'd get is you getting drunk and trying to climb into bed with me. Really, that would be upsetting to me, but I'm not afraid of you over it. If you didn't try in three years, I doubt you're going to insist on it tomorrow.”

Then Tor stopped them from talking with a wave and told them about what was going on with Ali. He was going to stop at the basics, that bad things had happened and that the King and Queen couldn't do anything, so they'd hatched a plan to protect her. The girl picked up where he left off and told them everything, crying through it again. Without being asked or it even being suggested she took the truth amulet from Tor's hair and turned it on, glowing steadily the whole time. By the time she was half through all of them had suggested assassinating Count Derring.

Tor agreed, but waited for her to finish, carefully not speaking on the topic at all. Because telling a room full of people that you were really willing to kill someone was stupid. They were all probably just venting, shocked and worried for their friends. If he could figure it out, how to take out a Count without starting a war, he decided to actually do it.

It didn't leave him feeling good but it was the right thing to do.

“We need to protect her first. So, I need a letter delivered and it has to be as soon as possible and from someone that can suggest to Smythe of Westend that coming to dinner tonight would be a good plan. Would you do it?” He looked at Rolph, who nodded, took the letter and left without another word. Tor nodded. Rolph was good like that, getting to work as soon as anything serious was needed to be done.

Trice moved towards him and touched his arm.

“Um, Tor, I think we need to talk, if we could find someplace private?” Her eye's looked at his, but had that sad look he associated with bad news.

Well, they weren't going out or even dating really, so she couldn't really break up with him again. Well, she could, but it wouldn't mean much, would it? He took her to the bathing chamber and ran a bath. No one could hear them through the walls, but a warm soak sounded nice anyway. Everything was hugely stressful right now, so much so he kind of wanted to yell “run away” and set out in a random direction.

He steeled himself, and took off his clothing, which got a chuckle from his friend and when he moved under the shower to scrub before his bath he felt something pressing up against his back, turning he slid his arms around the now naked girl and hugged her wetly. They

kissed without talking and then scrubbed each other sensually. The hair on her head was still mainly blond, but her pubic hair was dark and curly still. Sighing he pushed her against the wall a little roughly and knelt. If she wanted to “talk” to him, they might as well actually get to do something fun first. She didn't fight him and after a bit started to moan a little, then a lot.

Ursala had claimed she got loud, but Trice didn't seem to have any concern about being overheard at all. Without asking he turned her to face the wall and entered her from behind. The move was mock rough, he slid in gently, but gripped her hips hard enough to leave slight white marks. He didn't finish quickly, but did before she could. He placed her against the wall again and used his mouth and hands on her. He could taste himself on her too, but didn't care, he felt frantic and urgent as she finally released, getting softer instead of louder, gasping and finally pushing him away hard.

“Wow... oh wow.” She closed her eyes and slipped to the floor, her legs not holding her any more.

“I, give me a minute...” She waited, eyes closed for a long time, then she put her hand out so he could help her up and showered again.

“Fuck Tor... I mean it. Anytime you want, just let me know and I will gladly do it with you. Again. Now if you want. Here... or in front of the house with everyone watching. Whatever. I don't care right now.” She grinned and kissed him, he tried to do a good job of that too.

She shook her head and whispered in his ear.

“When Bonita left you that gold in Ward, we all thought she was just being silly. I can see it now. If she got half that, how could she not think you were a pro? A high end one too.”

Tor climbed into the tub, which was overflowing and had been for a while. The drain in the floor took the water away, back to the river, filtering it first, so that they weren't adding things to the water that a lot of people needed for drinking and bathing. Really with the Falcons up too, the water quality had improved a lot even below the city.

Tor laid his head on the edge and tried to relax, after a moment the water overflowed again as Trice got in, and then the water, already hot to Tor, who'd taken all his amulets off, suddenly burned as Trice increased the heat. She always liked to push things, didn't she? He fought a pained gasp and let himself get used to it, waiting for her to talk. To say whatever it was she had to. She didn't, and finally he cracked an eye and poked her, noticing that all her amulets were gone too and she had only one arm.

“Talk?”

She nodded and opened her eyes.

“Yeah. I... I won't hedge here Tor, but try not to hate me for it, all right?”

What could he do? He shrugged and smiled a bit.

“Going to get married to someone else? Or... I don't know, going to go back to Ward with Maria full time? That almost makes sense, I'm sure the King wants a person there still. I would if I was him. Probably for decades. Declare war once, and suddenly no one trusts you anymore, right?” Tor really did see it and that was saying something. He wasn't normally big on the idea of spying like that.

She splashed hot water at him and laughed, “No silly, well, it really isn't a bad idea, and I have been asked, Maria actually wants me to ask you to go back with them too. She likes you, you know.”

“What the who now? I mean... huh? She hates me Trice! You heard her when Smythe was questioning them down in Warden. She didn't really mean the apology she'd made and was just doing it because they wanted to use me to stop the mess they'd gotten into. It made sense, but that's hardly indicative of her liking me at all.” Tor stared, his mouth tightening and more than a bit of anger in his eyes.

Trice snorted and splashed him again.

“Don't blow things out of proportion. She had doubts about the situation, but you cleared up the thing with the flowers and she accepted it. Actually she went back to her room and cried for hours going on about what an evil Doretta she is and how you were so good and noble compared to her. Then you were nice to her favorite sister. A lot of people aren't, like messing with her heart is a sport... Bonita's really nice, but for years she hasn't been able to catch a break relationship wise. People do these elaborate set ups to hurt her. I know at first Maria thought you might be doing that too, trying to hurt Bonita to get at her, but I told her that just wouldn't happen. Not with you anywhere around the situation. I was right, of course.” She leaned back and bumped his thigh with her foot under the water, just able to reach him as long as her legs were.

“Then to cap it all, when the Larvals had her and you could have just killed them all, including her, you didn't. I told her about how your weapon could have done that easily you know, just ended it there in an instant. You made them let her go, even though you knew you were going to die doing it. Traded her life for yours openly. How could she not love you after that? I mean, I explained it to her, how if she were a serving girl or the horse boy you would have done exactly the same thing, but I think that made it worse. People aren't used to real selfless action like that Tor. It's like one of those stupid hero stories for girls, the bold Knight, or in this case wizard, risking everything for the lady he loves. Heck Tor, it's both. I keep forgetting

you're a Knight too. And you forgave her, she had you hurt and almost killed and you let it go... It doesn't hurt that you look like you do either."

Tor splashed her now.

"How does looking like a troll help here?" He asked softly. It wasn't nice of her to make fun of his looks.

"Heh! You know... I cornered Lairdgren the other day and made him tell me stuff about you and that situation. He mentioned how you just couldn't see how good looking you were. How when you look in a mirror you really don't see what we do. You see someone plain and boring. He still does you know. He told me that doesn't go away. Still, you have to accept that it's what is, even if you can't see it. You go around breaking hearts everywhere you go and don't even get it. Women and men throw themselves at you and you hardly seem to notice. It's... well, how really good looking people like you act, but it's rude. I mean Count Ward and Maria were talking about how pretty you are the other day and how only her rage at Alphonse made her act like she did towards you even back then."

It was hard to imagine, even with people telling him it was true. Trice moved in and kissed him again.

"Here's one, you remember at school when everyone used to stare at you? Why do you think that was?"

He thought, remembering the hostile stares, the girls giggling and laughing at him, the boys avoiding eye contact are giving him looks that had clearly threat behind them. Tor tilted his head.

"Because I was a joke to them?"

Eyes rolling she shook her head.

"Nope. Jealousy was some of it, sure, but mostly they were just in awe of you, but you were so stand-offish! Girls would play with their hair and make eyes at you and you'd just looked away. Guys would try to be your friend, and you barely acknowledged their presence. People stayed away because they thought you didn't like them, or were too good for them. Sara and I watched you for months before we actually talked and then you were all nice and everything. It took us by surprise you know, how nice you were. We didn't know all this stuff about you back then. So, in the future, when someone looks at you, smile and listen to what they say. I don't know, play make believe? Assume that they mean what they say?"

Right. That wouldn't work, but he'd try. Pretend people were interested in him? That might work. Till then he'd just keep Trice with him to let him know when he was messing up. She kissed him when he said so and then straightened.

"Which brings us to the thing I wanted to talk to you about." She took a deep breath and didn't break eye contact, working up her nerve

it seemed to Tor.

"I... can have Count Derring killed, if you want. It will cost gold, about ten thousand, and still take some time, but if we go to the people I have in mind it will happen. I know-"

"Do it. I'll pay. I'll get the money around today. Don't give me details and don't tell anyone else. Ever. The sooner the better, but.. yes." It would still mess with his mind he knew. Ordering it would be the same as killing the man with a sword, but if it was done right, there'd be no war or talk of war. It had to be done and no one else could do it.

Trice stared at him and swallowed hard, but she didn't ask if he was sure. His voice had told her that.

They dressed, rearmed, Trice literally, which she pointed out with a smirk, obviously having been saving that one to use on him. When they went into the bedroom Ridley was busily kissing and tickling Alissa on the bed, still clothed but things had been loosed in interesting places. Tor crossed his arms but Trice patted his shoulder and spoke first, not sounding angry at all.

"Alright you two, but Ridley, remember that she's underage, no matter what she looks like. You're not that old either, but no sex."

Murmuring assent Ridley went back to what he was doing and reached under her shirt again. Tor nearly hit him, but Trice pulled on his arm and walked out of the room. Right, he had things to do. Like get with Collette and see about arranging funds.

The money turned out not to be a huge problem, not getting it. Ten thousand golds? He didn't know it, but Tor had it sitting around the house. Just locked in a sturdy room behind the main dining area. The door would let Collette in, but no one else. She blushed at that, but he nodded. It was a good plan, safe, and he'd need her to run things while he was gone to Afrak. Besides, if he really wanted in he could do it. Not without using magic, but once he was better it wouldn't be a problem. If nothing else he could just turn the place off and everything inside would end up sitting on the ground. Anyone could do that, but apparently no one ever thought about it.

Transporting the money was harder, since having trunks floating along behind her would attract attention. Trice smiled and told him she'd handle it, now that she had the funds, and moved to leave, kissing him and mumbling about later. Collette smiled at him and winked.

"About time, she's been panting after you for at least as long as I've known you. The first time we met I thought she was going to scratch my eyes out for flirting with you. But you were there alone, so fair game."

"Wait... you were flirting with me?" Tor didn't remember it that

way at all, had she said something at the time? He blushed.

“Of course. Do you really think that women past the age of twelve can't control where their breasts are going? Think about it, how often do you bump things with your chest? Even if you're busty you have to move in close to brush against someone. I was standing with my whole body pressed against your back. The room was crowded, but not so much I had to do that. Plus I asked her if you two were friends, remember? It was clear flirting. Actually It was a bit heavy handed, but I was surprised to see someone as lovely as you there willing to talk to me. Plenty of men had copped a feel already, but you were the only one other than Tovey that actually carried on a conversation.”

Ah. Well. Trice apparently was right. He really needed to learn to pay attention. Colette was pressing up against his back, to demonstrate her technique, when his mother and father walked up. Tor blushed but didn't move away from the tall girl that stood behind him, she smiled genially at the new comers.

“Hello! Are you coming to stay with us? We have some rooms still. All on the top floor I'm afraid, so a bit of a walk, but the rooms are nice. I'm Collette by the way, Baronetta Collette Coltrass. Sorry about throwing titles around, but I've found that if I don't, people seem to think I'm a serving girl and get demanding. I'm in charge of the house for Master Tor. Do you need help with your bags?” The words came out so smoothly that it was clear that she'd said them hundreds of times over the last days.

The properly sized black haired man winked at her with a friendly expression on his face.

“Douglas Baker, this is my wife Laurali, Tor's parents among other things. Not to drop titles myself, but I'll have you know I'm the main baker for my village. Three hundred and fifty people now and growing fast.” He kept a straight face for a second then grinned, hesitated for half a moment, and bowed.

Tor's mother grabbed him into a hug and he felt his father pound his back a little too, just to add to the family feel of the moment. Laurali smiled regally at Collette and shook her head.

“We already have accommodations, staying with my daughter and her husband. We're just here to visit, if you have the time? Richard told us you're taking a break, a vacation? And not doing it very well at it yet either... Oh! Connie told me to let you know that she's horribly, terribly sorry about the invitation difficulties and is willing to make it up to you. Actually she was far more graphic about exactly how she was willing to do that than I, as your mother, really wanted to hear. She seemed quite... intent on it actually. I said I'd pass the message.” She made a face then, “but really Tor, be careful there. A bad break up with a school girl is a mess, but a Queen? I've

never heard of it. Probably because you don't break up with Queen's. Just keep that in mind." She spoke in clear, very royal, Noram standard, really she had the same accent the royal family and Burks did.

Was that because "proper speech" had been dictated and influenced by the Ancient for millennium? Or was it just coincidence, or practice?

His mother wasn't done, and smiled at Collette. It left an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. After all, in Two Bends exactly one relationship was ever discussed. Engagement for marriage. The rest just was. That was what he grew up with and his mother had been the main one teaching him and his brothers and sister those rules. But nearly the second she was outside Two Bend his mother had reverted and become an almost unrecognizable person. That was the woman he faced now. Perfect for the situation, here at the Capital, but embarrassing at the same time. Of course she was hovering her appearance so that she looked more like his slightly older sister than his mother and he didn't look his age at all yet.

"So, Baronetta Coltress, are you and Tor seeing each other?" From the way she said it Tor could tell she knew the answer.

Spies. Freaking spies all over the place.

"Oh yes. He's very popular. He also won't just use a girl for sex, so he has loads of girlfriends. What, five? Pretty attentive too. Though I think It's my turn to get some attention again Tor..." She gave the older two Bakers a sweet look.

"He did introduce me to Prince Alphonse though. Pleasant fellow, have you met him?"

They had, the Prince having gone to Two Bends a little over a year before with him, when he and Trice had gotten engaged. Tor suffered to hear more of his exploits bandied about than he'd have ever wanted his parents to hear, but at least they chuckled to learn of his bakery work.

Douglas clapped him on the back again.

"Good! I was afraid you'd let all this go to your head. Still a baker. Honest work keeps you grounded and in touch with real people." His dad looked... proud? Of him? Tor wondered at it, but then realized that good parents almost always were proud of their children as long as they weren't messing up too horribly.

By Two Bends standards Tor was definitely wrong, nearly evil, having more than one girlfriend. Here it was... Probably a little backwards, he was coming to realize. It felt overwhelming to him for a bit and he had to take a deep breath to hide it.

He really needed to get with his parents in on the whole thing too, since he was going to marry in a month, they'd need to be there,

or at least understand why he was doing it. Even if they disagreed he'd go ahead with it of course. He was an adult, sort of. He'd never defied his parents before, but if he had to now, to save Alissa, he would.

Taking a deep breath Tor walked them up to his room, knocked and popped his head in first and found Ali sitting in the single chair reading from "Manners", the only book he had. He felt his stomach tighten and start to burn a bit. Well, he thought, here it goes. He opened his mouth to speak, but Laurali rushed forward and hugged the girl tightly.

"Is this Alissa? Burks told me your plan... and why." She looked at the girl grimly, "I'm so sorry for all you went through. I had a chance to kill your father once, and spared his life. He tried to rape me. More to the point, he did rape me. Drugged first. I let him go when he swore it was just a game, but I should have ended him, I see now. Can you forgive me for my failure?" She held the girls hands in front of her.

Ali nodded.

"How were you to know? Besides, Tor is going to protect me now. He said so, and so did Kari. I'm scared, but I won't go back." It was defiant and not broken sounding now, her head held high.

"Ridley told me about how a Count tried to kill my brother David once and Tor made him fight him instead..." At this she sounded unsure and looked at the older people for confirmation.

Laurali nodded very seriously, making eye contact with Ali as she did. Brown eyes looking into the younger girls blue.

"That's true, I even saw the end of it, Tor let the man apologize to your brother, then let him go unharmed." She turned to Tor and swallowed.

"You... realize you can't do that here, don't you, I know that your make-up will make it a lot harder than for a regular person, but..."

Tor nodded and made a small gesture with his hand that he'd see Rolph use at school, held low, he moved it to the outside. His father didn't seem to notice, but his mother gave him a funny look, face suddenly tight, then nodded back once.

He knew. Saying what he'd planned and paid for wouldn't help and they were better off not knowing. Instead they talked about the wedding, a surprise thing that would take place at the docks in Printer the day of their return.

Then Alissa would go to Two Bends until she went off to Lairdgren school a month later. That... was fine with him. He could make things there, as he got back to his copy work and slow building, while he returned to classes. They could get a house, or really, he had some they could use, so it wouldn't be a problem that way. They just needed to rent some land. He'd missed a year, but if he worked hard

maybe he could catch up?

His mother and father looked shocked, as if he'd suggested that he grow a second head and name it Timmy.

It was totally what he'd name his second head. Except of course that he already had a brother with that nickname. Unless he switched over to Weasel full time? Then it would work. Maybe he'd send a note and check with the boy? He stared back at his parents though.

"What?"

His father waved at him and Ali.

"Well, I guess no one expected you to, well honor the marriage really, a fiction to protect her, not something to tie you down." The words weren't unkind in tone, but it was blunt enough that Tor frowned at his dad.

"Excuse me? Why wouldn't I take is seriously? She's great, and I need to be there to make sure she's taken care of, don't I? I said I would be." So there, he wanted to add but didn't, Ali smiled up at him sweetly.

"Oh! That's so wonderful! You'll be the best husband and I promise I'll learn all the proper things. I've even started!" She gestured at the book. Then she looked down at her hands.

"I understand what they mean though. You have a bunch of women right? But, that's all right. I like all of them and Kari said that she'd live with us if I wanted, at least part of the time. So I won't be alone really, and Petra can come, and Bonita. Petra can teach at the school I think. Davie said. Bonita can help me run the house, since I'll be in school a lot..." She looked happy for a second, but then her face fell a little. She was used to her dreams being dashed. Too used to it.

Nodding Tor patted her shoulder after moving closer to her.

"See? We already have a plan. I know she's a bit young, but legal is legal, and from what I've seen I doubt that any nobles will complain about it. Really, it's the easiest part of all this stuff so far. Now I've just got to work some things out and get away from the kingdom until she's of age." Simple, right?

They talked until dinner and didn't leave to go down until Karina came to eat up in the room with her friend. Tor, they told him, had to be at the meal, or it would be noticed. His parents went with him and sat just below Smythe at the table. Rolph across from counselor, on the right, and Count Ross on the other side of Petra. Of all the Counts and countesses he wasn't really close to, the old couple were his favorites by far. Countess Ross was huge and kind of ugly, but had a brilliant laugh that she used often, loved wearing bright colors, and dotted on her Count, who still seemed more like a well dressed gardener than anything else.

What wasn't to like?

They ate dinner properly, Smythe seeming shocked that he was so near the head of the table instead of the far end, where people used their poison snoops openly, and checked their food with a little fear, even though he didn't even know them, and had no personal problem with anyone down there. It was where, traditionally, the people out of favor were put, so that everyone else had to eat first, meaning they'd be poisoned, and act as tasters, for the ones in trouble. It was a convoluted and useless system, hence the poison detectors. Tor checked his own food and passed his own device to Smythe, Collette making a point of using only that one too. It was real, but the idea was that Smythe wasn't taking any more risk than they were.

The small talk was about the festival and how exciting things were this year, the singers and free food, events and all that. Countess Ross confided that staying with Tor was much nicer than the palace, which was, she assured them, still very nice, but those that insisted on staying there tended to be a little too concerned with the appearance of position.

"It's just a shame that the King and Queen can't come here for a night and get away from their own world for a bit. That would be delightful, but a lot of work to set up. The Royal Guard won't allow it I imagine. I'm surprised that Prince Alphonse is allowed, to be honest. Isn't it dangerous?" This came from the giant Countess who directed it past her husband and Petra to Rolph directly.

"Not really. This place is more fortified than it looks and there are guards here that no one knows about." He leaned close to her and whispered loud enough for the top quarter of the table to hear.

"If you look around you can spot the Royal Guard all over the place. They're the ones grinding their teeth over the change in routine." He smiled suddenly getting a polite chuckle from the table, echoed by those too far down to have heard. When in doubt, join in.

It was in the book. Chapter six.

After dinner he "retired" with Smythe, but didn't take anyone else along. It didn't concern them at all and no one thought it was odd. People often did that when they had to speak of either secret matters, or things so boring it would be tedious to guests still at table.

They went to a small room with wood panel walls, unstained looking but so rich and dark that the sanded appearance gave them a soft feel, smooth like silk. There were two large and comfortable chairs, made to be particularly soft to allow them to relax, sinking in a few inches as the furniture hugged their bodies comfortably. Like him, Smythe didn't drink alcohol, so there was a wine decanter filled with apple-pear juice. Tor fought a wince and checked it, both glasses and the outside of the container for poison.

It was his favorite flavor, but he'd nearly died drinking it once

and his body remembered that. Just the scent was making his stomach try and knot a little. The amber liquid was cold though, and when he took a sip delicious, even as he nearly gagged on it, his body trying to fight the poison that wasn't there by instinct.

Smythe waited, sipping slowly at the beverage. Finally, slowly, he spoke.

“Was there something you wanted to say to me? I take it that this isn't some clever trap, since you could have killed me a thousand times here already, so...”

Sip, near choke and swallow, a slightly painful thing, then Tor started.

“I'm due to go to Afrak and set up some rivers. It should take a month, maybe slightly longer. I wanted to get permission from you for it though, since I'm assigned to you for the investigation. I don't want to get in the way of it. We need to uncover all the Austran agents, so if I can't go, well, I'll send the gear and some people to set it up. I am the Ambassador... Still the war effort has to come first.” He could do that, Ali would still be safe, even if he wasn't there. He'd sneak over to get married on the day and it would be all right...

Smythe smiled and touched his arm. An odd gesture for the older man.

“Is that all? You want permission to go and do the King's work, building bridges of support with Afrak? It's... very kind of you to ask. Since we've determined that it was the Austrans, I just assumed that your part was done, and well done too. Those little truth devices... We've cleared more investigations in the last week than normally would be done in a year. I'm almost at a loss as to what to do with myself.”

It was nice to hear really. The devices would make sure that people got an honest hearing. It may not always be popular, especially with people that would have walked with a mere lie before who wouldn't now, but it was fair.

“There is something else...if you seriously have the time?” Tor added casually. Or maybe not that casually since Smythe gave him a wry and slightly sour look.

Smythe humphed at him.

“There always is. So what is it? Want me to help you railroad the Degray girl for the Princess? She's guilty, you can rest your mind there. She'll hang within a week.”

“That's... kind of the problem actually. We need to make certain she wasn't working with anyone else first. Once she's dead we won't have a chance to pick her brain, will we? Karina needs to know for certain that this is really over, and that if Degray had an accomplice, or if someone was backing her, putting her up to the thefts or moving

goods, that they're uncovered as well." Tor shrugged and grinned, it was actually a good point. They needed to get the whole of the weed, including the roots, or part of it could come back.

"Plus, Karina and Alphonse are going with me to Afrak. We want that to be kept quiet, obviously, for safety, but Karina would like things to be ready for her, trial wise, when she gets back, to get it over with, but also to be assured that the whole thing gets a real investigation and that Degray isn't railroaded. That basically means you doing the work. I love Karina, and we're close personal friends. If I did the investigation, or were even part of it, people might suspect something. They might also be right. I... can't be objective here... I want Lilli dead for this!"

His voice had become surprisingly sharp, so he took a deep breath and smoothed the green silk of his shirt. Taking a deep breath as if he needed to calm down he sat straighter and let his voice become cold.

"But it has to be a real investigation. Justice demands it. Even if it's some secret royal thing behind the scenes. It needs to be real and honest, so that when people find out later, they can look at it and know Lillith Degray had to die and her organization, if she has one, went with her. No doubts, no questions left hanging and no appearance of us having killed her for being unpopular, or inconvenient to the crown or one of the royal family. It has to be real. The case merits it and we need to show it so clearly that anyone trying to ever say different chokes on their words." Tor felt himself tear up and wiped at his eyes angrily.

The old man shook his head slowly, Tor felt his stomach drop.

"You want a full investigation done in a single month? On a theft ring like this? Trafficking in slaves? It could take a lot longer than that. I understood that Princess Karina was eager to see the end of this, but your point is well taken too, if she can be made to support it. I... to tell the truth, I felt the whole thing rushed, and while I understood why, as some things are best left hidden to save the Princesses pride, I'll hardly be spreading tales across the kingdom about it." Smythe sat up himself and started to nod softly.

"Very well then, I'll suggest to the King that I've conferred with my... colleague and that we both agree that a more thorough investigation is in order." The breath Smythe took was huge, filling his giant lungs slowly and let out even slower.

"It's the cowards part, but I'll leave the task of telling the Princess to you. Tell her... Three months? It's the best I can do, and I may need longer." He looked uneasy.

"Alright. I'll hold Karina and keep her out of the way. She wants justice too, but she may grow impatient. That monster killed her friend. I can't say I blame her for her anger, but you'll have your

time.”

Smythe rose.

“Very good then. I’ll be at it now.” His eyes shone with excitement, for some unknown reason, and he left without another word.

Chapter ten

They were going to leave the day after King's week ended, flying by transport to Printer and leaving from there by ship. Petra offered hers, but when it came down to it there were seventy people going with them and Petra only had the one bed. The Royal Guard respected Kolb's people and vice-versa, but they weren't letting the heir and first Princess go to a strange land without them. Tor didn't blame them. It was, on the surface, a stupid idea. Really they should have left Rolph all together, but he wanted to go, and Tor kind of wanted to have another guy to talk to.

It turned out not to be a problem at all. There were lots of men coming with them.

The problem was that Petra's boat just didn't have facilities for a group that large. Even two ships that size wouldn't be enough. The space was there, but it was configured all wrong. Tor looked at the problem, meditated on the state of his own field and decided to risk making something new. It was mainly something he'd already done in different parts. Just a larger boat with two in-ship levels with thirty furnished rooms on each of them. Some people would have to share and the rooms weren't big and they were plain, but had nice beds and a restroom in each. The showers and tubs would have to be shared too, but fully twenty people could use them at one time. If that wasn't enough for Royal Guards and the combat instructors, then Tor had sorely misjudged them.

He worked slowly, in small bits and pieces, holding things in place as he ate and checked his field for stress. There wasn't much really, as long as he went slow. It took the remaining time and he had to skip the official meals, but just had it put around that he was busy... entertaining. The Warden people gave it a wink and a nod, and no one did more than offer to help.

With his... entertaining.

On the day they were to leave Tor got up and ready, Alissa doing the same, insisting on showering with him, though he didn't let her touch him. That didn't stop her from playfully trying. He didn't scold her, since they were to be married soon and you didn't treat your wife, no matter how young, like a child. Besides, she didn't look like one, and it was easy to forget. He didn't let himself though. Rules were there for a reason.

Even the arbitrary ones.

They needed four transports for all their things and no one had even asked what they were going to do to actually get there, which seemed a big oversight to Tor. Technically they could have used the

transports, but it would be a miserable trip, hours in cramped conditions with no restroom at all. Or water. But it would be fast too.

That was something to avoid. Slow was better for once. They had some food for the voyage and he bought more in Printer once they got there, because it was going to be better to have too much than to run out half way. Especially since they had all those giants with them, and Tor wasn't going to speed up the trip because their tummys were grumbling.

They over-nighted on the beach in front of Holly's house, Tor picking up a few pies from the baker in town to share, ten of them. The man reminded him they were already paid for as per their agreement, even as Tor delivered a few extra amulets to him with a smile. Then, before dark, he checked with Clark and Ethel in their store. Business had been going well and they'd started a few more concerns, using his share of the money. They'd need more devices soon, but could hold for a month, they told him, not seeming sure of that. He gave them about half of what he had left, hoping that he'd be able to go back to his copy work soon, otherwise several businesses were going to be in for a tough time because of his lazy ways. He seemed fine after the work he'd done on the boat for the trip, but if he was missing something Tor didn't want to end up falling into bloody chunks because he made one too many batches of lights.

The next day he took Petra out to set up the ship, hovering about three hundred feet up, he activated the amulet in his hand, the vast ship appearing directly beneath him. The pretty girl hovering next to him gasped. She wore a simple rust colored silk outfit and light, cream colored shoes, kicking her feet in excitement as he lowered the boat. Once it was in the water she landed on the deck instantly and spun a little, looking around, her face gleeful.

"Tor! I... How big is this thing?" The awe in her voice was gratifying.

That it floated and seemed stable was also gratifying, it was always so hard to be sure about things like that. Tor pointed to the front and then back.

"Five hundred feet long, one hundred and twenty wide. Five levels, but three are above the main deck, those buildings over there? In all there are sixty-five rooms, sixty below decks, five up here. The Captain's is the biggest, of course. The rest up here are for Rolph, Karina, Ursala and Ambassador Mutta. The kitchen should feed us all, and is probably little overbuilt space wise, at the back of the ship, inside on the first floor. I mean deck. The tubs and showers a level down from that." Tor looked over the side of the rail and saw that the water was pumping in and out already, so that was working right. Good. If worse came to worse a big boat with water at sea was better

than a big boat without. Dying of thirst on the ocean would be ridiculous, but he'd heard of it happening in stories.

Tor gestured for her to take the glowing focus stone and hang it on the post right in front of the pilot house.

"There you go Captain. You have the ship." Tor bowed to her, a low thing that would have fit the King himself.

She looked at him mouth half open and then smiled hugely, white teeth gleaming. Then she started doing a little dance like the combat giants all did when acting playfully gleeful. It was cute on her, but freaky when some of the others did it.

"Thank you." Was all she said, her eyes gleamed brightly and her look seemed proud and happy all at once.

Tor didn't actually get why she was thanking him for dumping a whole bunch of work and responsibility on her without asking, but he managed a satisfied look anyway, as if he hadn't been expecting to have to beg her to do it. She was the only one he was certain could find the continent of Afrak in a boat though.

They had to load using air transport, but the rear deck was large enough they could set down all the vehicles at once. They were a little close for comfort maybe, but the doors opened on the sides for off loading, so it worked. It was tempting to take them, just in case of problems, but they had a half dozen people with magic vehicles, and while they didn't get as big as a full transport, there were more than enough for everyone to get a ride if need be.

It would work. It took three hours to load everything, the kitchen being nearly as far from the transports as physically possible, but with seventy odd people, it didn't take that long. They didn't make Mutta load anything, being a dignitary, but Rolph was set to work by Petra who smirked as she did it. At sea, by long standing tradition, she outranked him. Actually as Captain she outranked them all, hence the biggest room, even though she didn't really need it.

The ship was jet black on the bottom, but the top portions had been done in a light blue color, nearly white. The railing that ran around the deck was a light wood rail, on true white stone. Tor had textured the deck so that it wouldn't be slippery when it got wet. He was sure some things had been forgotten, but it would go where they wanted and they could sleep, eat, bath and drink fresh water all the time. There were lights in each room and the hallway. It wasn't really pretty, but was just plain, not shabby. Still, he kind of held his breath when everyone started getting their rooms. He went first, just taking the room on the first floor, near the stairs, so that he could be found easily if anyone needed help. Kolb grabbed the one across from him and Wensa the room next to that. Probably for the same reasons. After that he lost track.

No one complained about the rooms, which had large beds that made themselves, and a few pieces of furniture. They were the same in each room, identical, with red carpet floors and brown soft chairs and sofas, with a table and writing desk that looked like wood. There were large windows too, each about four foot around to let in natural light. It was all shield, so it was just as strong as the wall itself, clear or not. It gave people a view at least.

That was it though. No drapes, no decorative hangings. Just a place to stay. No one whined about it, not to him at least. He really didn't know what people got on a regular boat and hoped he hadn't stinted too much. He'd been running on kind of a tight personal energy budget in a way, so it was about the best he could do safely for now.

Tor went back to the kitchen to start setting things up, and making some bread for dinner. They had fish and giant bugs for the meal, those lobsters they liked so much in Printer. So that and some vegetables, carrots and peas? It was standard stuff, but with a spice cake for dessert, it should do. It was three in the afternoon when they left, so he had six hours to get something ready. The bread first, large flat loaves, so they'd bake quickly and sheet cakes, he made four, but decided to layer them. If he was in Two Bends it would have been enough for all three hundred villagers to have some, but here, with what these giants ate he just hoped two full cakes would be enough. The recipe was so basic that he didn't have to look anything up, which was good, since he didn't have anything with him to do that with. In their hurry, no one had thought to get a set of recipes in for the trip. That was fine for baking, obviously, since he could make a few hundred types of baked goods from memory. The rest of the food would probably be a bit plain if he didn't fight to make it more interesting somehow. At least they had plenty of spices, which always made cooking easier.

The only real concern was the big bugs. He didn't have a real clue there, except that he'd been told to boil them until they turned bright red and that he needed a big pot with a lid so they wouldn't be able to escape. The idea of boiling them alive frightened him, but Holly had assured him that it really was the way it was done. It seemed cruel to him, but what did he know? They weren't exactly something he'd ever made before.

Tor set the food out Warden style and let people get their own when everyone started following their noses in at about nine. He didn't have a clock, but it was ready, so he let them eat, hoping he'd gotten the amount they'd need, at least close. If not he was sure that people would tell him. Loudly. Possibly with hitting being involved.

With a bit of creativity, he even managed a few decent sauces,

and melted butter for the sea insects, which he hoped wouldn't just go to waste. He'd only had it once himself and wasn't a big fan personally, but they had a lot of them in a salt water tank near the back of the room, enough for the first week. People took them when getting food, and made impressed and happy noises about it, so it must not be that strange to them. Then again, the royals always did weird things didn't they? Giant bugs... Eeek.

Petra came and took a seat without more than a nod to him, not even smiling. She sat at the table furthest away from the food and waved him over, then Rolph, Karina and Ursala when they walked in together. They had to sit and wait for Ambassador Mutta, who wondered in, looking around, a bit amazed by the space it seemed, as boring as the decor was, just having wooden tables and walls. Polished light colored wood though, so kind of pretty. Petra got her to come over too, and stood as she approached. Rolph did as well, which meant Tor needed to get to his feet he decided, feeling a bit tired already. Karina rose, and then bowed as Mutta approached.

Was this protocol stuff? They all bowed to Mutta, except Petra, who simply stood and led them all over to the food. Well, she was in charge, he guessed, though it all seemed a bit over done for fish and bread. There was plenty left at least, so it didn't look like anyone would be starving that night. It was simple, but Tor had tasted it and decided it was good enough for the first meal.

If they wanted better, he was going to need help. Looking around at all the royals Tor wanted to shake his head about the odds of getting it, but didn't. He'd just have to be clever about it or something like that.

Tor didn't say much at all during the meal, just listening to Mutta's plan, which involved docking at the big port on the south end of the continent and then flying to the desert to work. It was basic and had a lot of holes, but they'd work around it. They also had to go to the main city, not exactly either the capital or a city. She tried to explain, but couldn't exactly manage it. That at least was just the southern port, so they'd be there to start with, making his ambassadorial duties light.

"We live in a garden..." The words were vague, like she couldn't explain it really. She just smiled and waved her hands instead.

When people started to finish, Tor got up and brought the cakes out, which took up half the serving table, but got a murmur of approval. Who didn't like cake? Well, out there in the world, some crazy person sat in a cave eating bugs and reviling cake, Tor guessed, since there was always one, but normal people liked it. And this was a good cake, nearly perfect. The frosting had set nicely and everything. He took a small piece back to the table with him for Mutta. Everyone

else could jump up and fend for themselves, he decided. Tor waited for his because if it ran out he could do without.

Then, probably rudely, Tor pointed at things and asked, "what is that?" in Afrak. He repeated the words and built a picture of the objects quickly, holding the field of the word in mind. It wasn't magic, but it made everything easier to remember by far. After about half an hour Mutta ran him through everything again, asking him what it was in Afrak and having him name it while she pointed. He slightly mispronounced a few words, so he made a point of remembering them and trying to fix that. As everything wound down and people started to drift out Tor waved to Kolb and Wensa.

"Um, dishes? So me, you two, Karina and Rolph? If we do the first dishes, no one else can complain about the chore later, right? Well, they can, but anyone claiming to be too important or noble for it will have to eat their words without sauce. It's a good plan, don't you think?" The look he gave them was just level, slightly amused and filled with steel. The basic message was that if, after making the whole meal, Tor didn't get help with that part, he was going to mutiny.

For some reason no one seemed all that thrilled about the idea of being used as scullery help. They did it though, and with good enough humor once the task was started. Actually there was remarkably little playing around and the work went faster than he'd thought it would. The wash water was warm and he had a food dump that put the scraps into the outgoing water for the sea life to eat. Large plates of the cake were escaping back to the rooms he noticed, which was fine, but he wondered if everyone had gotten enough to eat?

Kolb kept washing as he talked, handing plates and silver off to the Prince for drying and stacking.

"It's a fighter thing. Gather provisions when you can, because you don't know what's going to happen later. If they were hungry now they'd just eat more, you didn't run out of food, so it's probably fine. I'll listen for grumbling, but it should be all right."

That got a nod from Wensa.

"Indeed. No one here would complain openly about the food, not on the first day, but I'll listen too. So far if anyone has complaints it'll be an individual food preference issue. Lobster and whitefish with rosemary sauce and fresh melted butter, while at sea? Then that lovely cake for desert? Most impressive. Really I figured it would be sea biscuits and limes for us, not having a cooking staff. I wasn't aware of your kitchen skills." The Royal Guard Captain smiled at him, approvingly, which shocked Tor a little and made him blush. It wasn't like they were the best buddies ever or anything.

After a bit Tor understood she was trying to be nice to him, probably because they weren't the best of friends, and had kind of

gotten off to a rocky start, relationship wise, what with her wanting him tortured, and Tor thinking she wanted to kill him. For months.

Karina was busy putting away the dishes, walking quickly from one secured rack to another. The plates were stacked like normal, but between four supports that just touched the sides of the dishware, so they couldn't shift much if the boat rocked. The cupboards were done to look like dark cherry wood with brass handles. The dowels themselves looked and felt like wood, but that was just an illusion of course. When she made sure the last was in place she turned and looked at Tor.

"We should make some rolls for breakfast tonight, and get people to work at each meal." Her gaze shifted to Wensa and then Kolb, looking a bit more "Royal Princess" suddenly. "If we keep making him do it all, by day three Tor will be serving a big pot of potage for every meal and handing out sternum punches to any whiners. I'll help, but..."

But she didn't know how to cook or bake. Why should she? That was something she'd never had to do at all. She hadn't even warmed her own food. Servants did that, and when there were no servants, you hired some. But here she was just as clueless as anyone. Less really, because she'd helped at the bakery for a week, practically a professional compared to the rest of this crowd. Even when he couldn't go, she went and helped Box along with Davie, who'd apparently dragged a rather battered and beaten looking Jerral along towards the end to scrub the whole place with an old toothbrush. Karina would do to start with.

They didn't finish until one in the morning, but had sweet spice rolls, bread for the next day and all the breakfast prep they could do without fixing the food itself. Tor was about to fall over by the time he got to his room only to be woken up while it was still dark out by an insistent pounding on his door.

"Tor wake up! Emergency!" It was one of Kolb's people, one of the medium sized giant guys, drunk off his rear, and sopping wet. He was also naked and had three other naked people in the hall with him, two guys and a girl. All huge and hard looking. In all ways from there flat abs to... Well...

"mergency?" Tor felt like his mouth had been wired shut and looked at them sleepily with one eye. What did they need? If they were looking for sex lubricant they really should have waited for morning. They could use cooking oil, but he wasn't getting it for them right now and if they went into his kitchen and messed things up he'd dangle them all over the side by one hand. That meant they'd all swim, because there was no way he could hold them up.

"It's the baths! Flooding! The ships sinking!" The girl, Dara he

thought her name was, screamed. It got everyone to wake up and come to the hall quickly enough. Tor was already padding down the hall, glad he at least slept in nice tan silk clothes. At least that night he did. There was water on the floor to be certain. Three foot deep. It wasn't a big deal yet, the door had steps going down in case of spills which would buy them some time.

Sizing up the situation he got it without too much trouble. Being creative people they'd taken a plate from the kitchen, focus stone in a deep red-black, so military issue, that had probably carried cake back to a room, and covered the drain on the floor, noticing that the whole room, about a hundred foot on each side, could be turned into a pool by blocking it. It worked pretty well and they found the room filled a bit faster than they'd realized it would. No big problem, except the plate had gotten stuck to the floor, the water emptying under pressure from the bottom and all that water on top... They couldn't move it at all.

Great. Well, good to know that would work if they wanted to go swimming.

The water moved in fast, it had probably filled the whole space inside half an hour, with the drunken giants running around desperately missing the sigil that would turn it off, once they realized they wanted to stop the flow and couldn't, they'd freaked. That part of room was already under water, meant to be used while sitting down in a tub. Tor sighed.

Stupid drunk giants.

"Alright. First lesson about magical devices? Anyone? No?" Tor didn't know why he bothered, but he was wet past his belly button and a little sleepy still. He looked at the people gathered in the doorway and finally Rolph, his short red brown hair, more red than brown now, raised his hand like in school. Everyone stared at him with wide eyes.

"Yes, Mr, Cordes?" Tor said dryly, tilting his head with a wry and slightly disgruntle, smile.

"A sigil is only an indicator so that people can focus their intent and it's not really needed?"

"Exactly. So, the water?" Tor gestured to him and after a moment Rolph closed his eyes, concentrating and slapped the wall. This caused the water to shut off instantly.

"Yay. Good job. Everybody here got that, right? Because there will be a test later. There always is. Now everyone on early kitchen duty, memorize the faces of these four, since you get to boss them around all morning, get that and go get some rest. Anyone not on that detail, jump in and help me move this plate please? This is going to be a pain without using magic." Grumble, grumble, Tor thought, working

his way to the drain, the water nearly to his upper arm even as he stood upright.

It took an hour and a half, but one of the Royal Guards slid it off to the side somehow, ducking all the way under the water and working the plate back and forth with nearly superhuman effort. It was just enough to start the flow, two hours after that they managed to slide the plate all the way off. Then the room cleared of water in about twenty minutes. Tor remembered who was in the water with him the whole time and sent them all off to bed. It was tempting for him too, but he had to get to work soon or breakfast would be lunch and then people would complain about the poor service and he'd have to sternum punch them all.

Karina had said so. That made it kind of a royal edict, right?

Only they mainly had shields so it wouldn't work.

He made himself clean up and shower before going in. If you touched food, you had to be tidy. It was a psychological thing as much as to prevent disease, at least with him. Tired and clean beat tired and dirty any day, if you got the choice, right? Tor went through the motions well enough, even thought a slightly ill feeling ran through him, starting at his head and working down to the pit of his stomach. Just tired, Tor thought. He'd never gotten sick in his life and really doubted anyone had been poisoning him here. They needed him to make the food.

Plus... he'd made all the food and was the only one handling it. No one could easily poison just him at least.

In the kitchen he found a still sleepy Trice, David, and Karina waiting. Bless them. Pushing into action as fast as they all could go. It felt like it took forever, but the late night prep paid off and they were ready to feed people by eight. Later than he liked, but no one complained about hunger pains yet. As he ate sitting next to Mutta, she rolled off phrases and terms in Afrak, some pretty complex. Tor paid attention as he could, but knew that he wasn't doing what he should be on the task. Sighing he turned to the woman.

"Oh, sorry Doctor Mutta, I'm sleepy and I think I missed that last one. Did you say that "fork" is literally "food stabber" in Afrak? Or am I just not getting the words right?" He waved the implement in question. He said it all as she'd been instructing, except fork, of course.

"That's right. "Food stabber" very good! I didn't think you'd have more than ten words of my language yet, but you sound almost fluent already." Her voice was excited.

"Really? All I'm doing is trying to pay attention to what you're saying. Hey, do you think you could work with me on this during lunch too? I know it can't be that interesting for you. I must sound like

a four year old, but it helps and I may need it. Ambassador and all that.”

Next to him, absently munching at a cinnamon roll Petra cocked her head at him.

“I didn't know you already spoke Afrak.” She said in Noram standard.

“I kind of thought you were just learning last night, to tell the truth.”

Ambassador Mutta laughed and told the new Captain that this was Tor's third lesson, saying it in Noram standard for her. Petra smiled and kept eating. Either she thought it was a joke or cute of him. He hoped for cute, because he kind of wanted to spend some time with her later. Or Bonita. She was on board, but had been spending all her non-meal time with Rolph. Sigh. Well, as long as she was happy and his friend was pleased, that should be enough for him, right? Still, if he saw her he was going to try and break her free for at least a chat. Tor missed her company.

At lunch Mutta, which he learned meant “gray” in Afrak, started to read to him from a book. It wasn't a story, but a complex science codex. He had to stop her every few seconds to ask questions, some about complete concepts that he'd never even heard of before. The text was about medicines based on animal products, things genetically altered to be of use to humans by a portion of the Afrak community. He got that “genetic” meant “life instructions”, but it was also clear the physical bits they were talking about weren't the whole story as to how things worked. Finally he stopped her and asked a question about it, which caused her to draw back a little, her robe, something made from magic itself, suddenly flaring pink. She didn't realize she'd made the change without thinking, but then magic was a new idea to her, wasn't it? Tor kept himself from shaking his head.

“Do some of your... people that do genetics, get better results than others, while some people can't seem to get any at all, even though they're doing the same things physically?” He looked at her hard, having asked in Afrak. It was still a little rough, and he definitely had a Noram accent, but she nodded, clearly able to understand his meaning.

“Yes... We don't know why it is, and select out for that during training, but it happens. Why do you ask?” Her voice was curious rather than annoyed at least.

It was only a guess, Tor told her as he collected his and her plates and bowls to take to the window where Dara, and her hung-over giant friends, were taking in dishes for cleaning. It was just that magic rested a level down from where the Afrak worked and part of the instructions for life were held there, if those didn't change, then the

genetics probably wouldn't do what was wanted as often as it seemed to.

The best doctors were probably influencing things magically without knowing it. That was all. Most people did it all the time, the effects were just too small to easily notice. Magic itself wasn't unique really, it had its basis in how the mind worked. Everyone's mind, and the mind wasn't separate from reality after all.

"Just a guess though. If I could see it done, later, when my own field repairs itself more, I could tell for certain. I think so at least." It was a pretty small and fine part of reality to be working with, so maybe not. It would be fascinating to try though. Tor kind of wanted to drop into a meditative state and see if he could do it right then, but realized that then he'd have to slam his head into a wall for being stupid and using magic too soon without a very good reason. It would have to wait.

That changed how Mutta treated him for some reason. Drastically.

Instead of casually reading from her book she began to drill him nearly constantly on Afrak and biological science. It got so bad that he woke up one night having dreamed that she was doing it in his sleep, slipping into his room and murmuring next to his head. She hadn't, but he woke with a start anyway, covered in a light bit of sweat.

"What the heck was that?" He murmured out loud. Tor didn't know for certain, but it felt like his deep mind had decided to give him lessons in his sleep too. Grand.

As he drifted back to sleep it occurred to Tor that he'd been speaking in Afrak, thinking in it too.

For all that he had a private room, which was kind of nice in a way, he kept missing all the women in his life somehow. He baked and cooked with them, saw them all at meals even, but when he had a few minutes to spare they'd be gone. Finally after dinner on the fifth night out he saw Ursala just sitting at a table and reading.

"Finally! Someone. And you're not even speaking Afrak! Talk to me, please?" Tor asked a bit desperately. Mutta was a saint to work with him so much, but he needed a distraction for a while and this was about the only time he had for it. He'd heard other people talking about being bored, but he didn't see it. There was so much to do. Cooking, baking and cleaning, learning Afrak and stretching for a few minutes before bed so he wouldn't freeze up totally. He should go and practice with the people on the deck after lunch, but he had to make time for it... Maybe Mutta would continue their lesson up there while he fought? It wouldn't work well, but if he didn't get some kind of exercise soon he'd start going soft.

"Does sex count as exercise?" He asked abruptly, but it got her to

smile and set the book in her hand aside.

"That depends on how you do it. Want to try?" She seemed interested in helping with that chore, so he nodded his head seriously.

"As long as you talk to me while we do it. In Noram standard preferably, since you can't speak properly. Backwoods I mean. But you could pray at me in Tellerand right now for all I care."

They actually went up on the deck and at first he thought she was proposing they have sex against the railing, overlooking the ocean itself. It was a little more public than he'd like, but he had to admit, it would get the heart racing. She was just leading him to her room though. It was bigger than his by two thirds and had a huge bed in it. He hadn't been in it physically, but the layout was familiar, having come from his thoughts originally. No one else seemed to notice, but the whole ship felt like Tor. Even the kitchen and restrooms were built to his standards, not anyone else. He'd made the facilities a bit bigger, knowing giants would be around, but that was all. Ursala hit her clothing amulet to turn it off and told him to pick her up and fuck her while she faced him.

Given their sizes it shouldn't have worked at all, but he found he could do it, especially as she chanted naughty encouragements at him to go faster and not stop. Finally, spent and panting after twenty minutes they fell on the bed together.

"Not bad! I must weigh fifty percent more than you do, but you didn't even slow down. God, you're stronger than you look, you know? Anyway, catch your breath and we'll start the next part."

Tor had to give her a funny look, since he couldn't speak yet. There was a next part? Well, he'd try. Hopefully it wouldn't kill him or anything.

They slept together in her bed that night, and in the morning he woke already aroused. She chuckled and used her hands on him, since, she assured him, it would be faster that way, at least the way she did it. Her fist blurred at times and pleasure ripped through him, but he was able to get to work on time.

Then, of course, the old schedule resumed with a vengeance, since people were starting to get restless and didn't want to help with cooking duty any more. On the eighth day no one showed up to help with dinner at all. Looking around the empty kitchen he almost just dove in and tried to struggle his way through, but then realized that if he did that, people would keep missing their shifts, just dumping everything on him. They didn't have a cook or baker, or any other crew except the fighters and Royal Guard, and he was trying to make it all work, but really his main job right now should have been getting ready to build rivers and being an Ambassador. Shrugging he decided it was passive aggressive mutiny time then. Really he wondered if

most of them would get the idea, but nothing for it but to try, right?

Tor made a large pot of oatmeal, one of the giant pots that he could barely lift when full, toasted someday old bread, and put out honey for it. Then he made half a roast fowl for Mutta with elaborate trimmings and fixings. She was an Ambassador and didn't fall under his ire on this one after all, no one expected her to wash dishes or cut vegetables. They better not at least.

Plus, really, also being an Ambassador, he wanted to remind her how he should be treated once they got to her place. Good food and attentive care. It probably wouldn't happen, he knew, what with him being male, but it was worth a shot.

The way people yelled and grumbled you would have thought he'd kicked them in the collective groins. It was a thought, but since any one of them would probably kick his butt without thinking, a few just by falling on him, Tor decided to save that option for later.

"But..." The big scary Baron sputtered loudly, "I hate pottage!" He cried piteously enough that people made sympathetic noises.

"Oh? Good then. This is oatmeal cereal, not pottage, that would have slivers of sugared meat in it." He grinned when he said it, but the large Baron didn't seem placated for some reason.

Tor pointed out softly, not raising his voice at all, that no one had shown up to help, so he figured to everyone was bored with eating interesting food and just wanted something plain and wholesome. In other words what they were getting from now on unless he had help at meals. There was a return trip too, he pointed out casually, gesturing at his own bowl of oatmeal with his black focus stone spoon. A few of the wooden chairs scratched on the floor, but no one spoke. From the glares he was getting from nearly everyone it became plain that no girls were magically going to find his bed that night either. He considered announcing to the room that he'd like some company just to see what they said, but realized that might be taken as an invitation to poison him, or stab him in his sleep.

Trice made a big circle in the air with her spoon and dug in, liberal dollops of honey on the top of hers.

"Actually this is really good Tor. Thanks." She took a big bite and smiled at him.

Everyone else glared, except Mutta who just started coaching him in Afrak again. She was a hard and driven instructor, but he had no doubt he was learning more than just how to speak her tongue. His knowledge of biological sciences had increased a thousand times in the last days, going from something around "things breed and have babies" to understanding that small changes in the information that make something up, when copied thousands, millions, of times and allowed to grow can make complex and lasting changes to a

developing creature.

Or field, his mind put in excitedly.

It made sense. What was a living thing but a growing and evolving field of information that organized physical properties? Could that be adapted to his building work? It would be a little slower, but what it took from him, the effect on his field, would be less too, and he could have a lot more novel builds going at once. It was worth a shot. Unfortunately he didn't have any growing plants on board to look at, and doing more than searching how a plants field worked was silly right now. Using another human would take too much time and have effects on him too. Probably.

The next morning he found a half dozen volunteers waiting for him and rewarded everyone by making egg toast and sausages as well as eggs and just to keep things sharply in mind for everyone a small pot of oatmeal. No sweet rolls, but no one dared speak about it to him, if they spoke at all. Heh. Well, it seemed like someone had gotten the idea at least. Probably Kolb and Wensa.

Then, the Royal Guardsmen hadn't complained about the food the night before, had they? No they just ate it, without even making faces.

It took longer to make the southern port than he'd figured it would, ten days instead of seven. When he asked Petra about it she grinned.

"On the way back we can make it a lot faster, a few days probably. I went slow to kill time and get people used to being on board. Plus, how often do I get to play sea Captain on a real ship? I had to pull rank just to get people to leave you alone so you could study with Ambassador Mutta though. The girls kept talking about sneaking you off and having their way with you. Not just the ones you know either. A couple of Royal Guards actually had a plan in place to nab you after dinner a week ago. I'd have been in on it myself, but I actually have to steer this thing between meals. If you help pilot at night we can make it back way faster. I've been going dead while I sleep. Short shift on it, but still..."

He kissed her, and told her that they'd make time for sex if he had to come and do her while she drove back. Petra told him it sounded fun and made him promise.

They laughed, because they both knew they weren't doing anything of note in Afrak. Mutta had flat out told him that people would freak out if anyone suggested that anyone ever had sex outside of marriage. Tor passed the word to the commanders of their separate groups. If they weren't careful half the crew would end up married. Fine if that's what they wanted, but awkward if some guy or gal thought they were just getting a little friendly and exotic sex only to find they were expected to set up house permanently. It would look

bad if they lost a big chunk of the crew after all and Tor wasn't going to let them escape the duty if it came up.

It could cause an incident if they did that after all.

It didn't matter, they were there to work and Tor had a plan of sorts. Mainly he was dumping the duty of getting food on Mutta, who seemed half panicked about it, which Tor took as a good sign. A ten person flying team, led by Wensa, being a woman and naturally bossy, was to set up all the rivers while everyone else followed the mapped out lines for the water outlets. The Afraks would get to set up the irrigation and all the plants. It seemed fair to him, in fact it was the deal they'd made. He'd get the water in and out for them and they'd do the rest of the work. Then they'd run by the Capital, or where ever the leaders lived and head home. Simple.

The first snag happened when they tried to dock at the large Afrak southern port. They were willing enough to have them it seemed, based on the happy way people waved at them and called out, but the dock was dwarfed by the ship. Not wanting to unpack everything yet, since it would take several days to off load it all and then do it again in a week or two, they backed the ship off a couple of miles, so it wouldn't be in the way, and set up to fly to shore. It was about five-thirty in the afternoon when they stepped out of the magical carriage, Mutta going first, to run interference, she said quickly in Afrak. After all, the Princess didn't speak the language and the Court Jester was the Ambassador. If she didn't speak up pretty quickly women would start making offers on Tor and the Prince for marriage.

It was a joke, he thought, since she smiled when she said it, happily enough, but the very first woman to approach them looked at him and Rolph and offered ten genetically modified silk goats for the tall one and twenty for the pretty one, which, blushing, he assumed was him. Mutta cringed.

"Are you trying to start a problem? The tall one is the Prince of Noram, who will lead it one day, and the pretty one is the Ambassador to our land! Plus, look at them, they must be worth fifty times that even if they weren't. The correctly sized one there? He learned our tongue in just over a week, and is grasping genetics faster than I've ever seen any do. No, I must spurn your offer. Perhaps if you collect a group of friends you could afford to buy them together and share? A very large group of wealthy friends."

The she turned to everyone else and bowed.

"She welcomes you and hopes your stay in our fair land is a peaceful and educational one, and expresses her admiration for you all."

Tor tried to fight a smile from his face, which made Mutta wave

at him, addressing the dock woman again.

"I told you he'd already learned the language..."

The woman, the head of the dock proper, seemed more intrigued with him after that rather than less. She kept making a point of standing close to him and touching his arm and shoulder, pretending it was casual the whole time. She wasn't bad looking, about forty he guessed and wearing tough looking clothes that might have been some kind of canvas, but didn't seem exactly like it. The colors were muted brown and green, so probably work clothes. As they talked, the woman kept moving just a little closer to him, until their shoulders touched. She did have a bright and friendly smile on her slightly round face. It wasn't fat, he could see a hint of lean muscle in it even, just the shape of it.

Mutta got them permission to keep the ship where it was, and to visit the town that evening to look around, but cautioned that the men and women on the ship, while nice people, were all giants, save a few, and that they wouldn't understand an offer to buy marriage.

Tor shrugged.

"Well, they're royals and nobles mainly, really an offer like that wouldn't be misunderstood either, but the crew will be needed to go back with us, so if any women are truly interested, they would need to be willing to relocate, men too, but from what you said the fellows won't be making a lot of offers? And if Mutta here could act as the first proxy for their mothers? Then she can get with Princess Karina, since she can act in that capacity officially, if needed." It made sense to him anyway, the Queen could do it legally, just like the King could act as a person's father at need. Anyone's, regardless of their age. So here, for their people, those duties would fall to Rolph and Karina.

Mutta smiled and winked at him, something he didn't even know she knew how to do. She asked where the other flying craft could land, and found a field to the east of the... expanse. That it wasn't a city, which she'd tried to explain earlier, was absolutely correct. He had to look hard to see how the low hills were actually houses that had plants growing all over them. There was a dense spread of trees and bushes, making it look more like a sparse forest rather than a place humans lived.

It was beautiful. Maybe the most lovely thing Tor had ever seen.

The food, he saw, was right there, grown next to the houses, and in between them. Large distances had been established between each place, at least an eighth of a mile, unless there were more hidden places around that his uneducated eyes just couldn't find. Once he got used to the idea Tor could see that it was a good plan over all. Everything was there. No need for far off farms, so no transport, except for moving people to one place or another to chat. It wasted a

lot less than a similar size town in Noram by far. It had the land space of a city, but the population must have been about ten thousand or less. He asked the dock boss, forgetting for a moment that men were second or third class citizens here.

That didn't stop her from answering, she even seemed please that he'd thought to ask. Tor wondered if she was flirting with him, being humoring or something, to keep his attention? That or the dock workers were just cool that way. Or maybe she just didn't think men had to be stupid and useless?

"About seven thousand. We can feed twice that without harm, but the population board has kept us stable for the last few hundred years. We don't get a lot of visitors here, not that come ashore. The Tellerand men come to trade, that and tell us of their god, but they always seem insulted when women try to buy them, instead of taking it as a compliment. Men are rare here, so we have to jump if we don't want to miss out. How is it done there, in Noram?" She seemed curious so Tor answered without thinking too hard about it. He had to be diplomatic, but she'd asked.

"Noram? For a marriage? Normally either your parents arrange it for you, or, if you love someone, a man goes and begs the girl's parents to let them marry. Sometimes there are gifts that go to the parents, and a dowry isn't that different from buying outright, except it doesn't go to the girl's mother, but stays with the girl herself, so that she and her husband can use the wealth to start their life together. Where I come from specifically, you can sometimes buy a wife or husband from their mother for livestock. So for me your ways aren't that different, though I already have a betrothed. She's on the ship out there."

The boat didn't have a name he realized. Then, it was the only giant black and light blue ship on the ocean that he knew of, so it should be all right for now, a description would suffice. The woman nodded and as they moved back to the carriage approached Mutta again. They talked for several minutes before coming back.

"Hah, Court Jester! She offered to send your mother forty silk goats if you have a brother with your look and tongue skills!"

He kept his face blank while the others laughed. Then he nodded.

"If you see her again, please let her know I have several younger, single brothers. All of them very clever, will you? I think my little brother Timon may actually be better at languages even, he's ten though, so a little young. My mom might just take her up on her offer. Forty regular goats would be an unheard of price for a boy. I don't know what silk goats are, but I imagine they're rather more precious?"

Wensa was the one flying them back, and she was clearly fighting a laugh of her own all the way. When he climbed out and his head

moved closer to hers she smirked.

"She could tell you had good tongue skills just from talking to you? She must be an expert in the field." She chuckled then, so he stuck his tongue out at her. Lethal killer or not, Tor wasn't taking jibes from her without a response. He didn't have a witty come back right now, but when he thought of one he'd... regret not thinking of it earlier and not say anything.

Obviously.

Coming back six months later with it wouldn't even make sense. Instead he stared at her for a second.

"Want to try for yourself?" He said instead batting his eyes at her. Really as isolated as he'd felt on the trip, even with everyone else around, it suddenly seemed intriguing, even if she probably would kill him for suggesting it.

Instead she laughed.

"Alright. Can't turn down an offer like that can I? Not at my age. Now? How about when we're safely back home? I don't want to distract you from your work, now do I?" Her voice had gone... sweet. Polite and intrigued. Right, the rules at play. She couldn't say no outright without being rude, could she?

Tor chuckled. He should have known better than to try and fluster someone like her. If he pushed her on the topic she'd just... do it, most likely. Wouldn't even blink. Instead he bowed. At least that baffled her, it being well outside protocol for the situation. Score one for him. Half a one at least. It wasn't much of a victory actually... Sigh, he thought making sure he didn't laugh, oh sigh.

Tor was kind of tempted to just stay in his room and sleep. It was a rare opportunity, seeing Afrak, but he didn't really want to walk around translating for people all night. They could have at least tried to learn some Afrak on their own, but no one else had care to. So now for all his effort he got to tell women, exotic with their dark skin, though the ones he'd seen had all had short curly black hair that looked interesting too, but wasn't like a birds bright feathers at all, that they couldn't really buy the pale giants.

If they'd listen.

The dock woman hadn't been bad, older than him by about twenty years, he guessed, maybe more if they lived longer than in Noram. She didn't seem to treat him any particular way really, just normal, if a little more flirtatious than a common woman from Noram would have been. Like he was a regular person and everything. It wasn't until they were going around to see how the city was laid out that he really understood the difference. The women on the dock actually dealt with foreign men regularly and knew not to act too superior. They were special that way. The rest of them didn't do that.

Not at all.

For all that she half ignored the King sometimes, it seemed that their Afrak Ambassador was special like that too. Practically open minded and accepting compared to the average woman in the street here. They barely saw the men at all it seemed.

Mutta explained who they were and why they were there, and that they had the heir and second in line for the throne of Noram there and the Ambassador. Everyone seemed to think that Wensa was the Ambassador, being the oldest female and that Ursala and Karina were the heirs. They questioned them incessantly about how the rivers worked and how soon things would be coming together. Tor had to laugh after a while and elbowed Rolph in the ribs.

"Watch this." Tor made his clothing look like one of Mutta's more colorful robes, a silk dress looking thing with pink, green and teal blue stripes running at an angle across it. Then he arranged the top to bunch a little giving him just the slightest hint of breast in the right place. Barely noticeable, about what Mutta had going on. Most of the guys in their crew didn't even notice, the Noram women didn't either. Suddenly he was the Ambassador though, young or not. It made the night easier, the only price being his dignity. Not that he had any of that left. But when in a strange land it was on him to try and meet their customs and ways, not force his on them.

With a bit of patience he turned the topic to how they produced food, and got one older woman with brilliant blue hair and orange eyes with catlike slits to explain how the whole thing worked.

Now she was exotic looking. Tor half wondered if he could drag her back to Noram to visit the King and Queen. That would go over well in court he knew. Tor wondered if she could see in the dark like a cat too. That would be useful for the military, if he could figure out how to make a change like that. No more making individual lights for them at least. They could just pass around one "eye change device" once.

If he had the land, he told Rolph, he could bring in water and do this in the wastelands north of the Capital. It would take work, but the idea was sound. They had the water there already now even, if they started in the area by Wildlands Station and the flight school. Mutta excitedly translated what he'd said and Tor found himself drug off into one of the dwellings. The other seventy odd people were left outside alone and without a translator. Hopefully Karina wouldn't sell them all before he got back. Maybe a few as a good will gesture? No, he decided. Not until after the work was done. The Prince nodded to him.

"Well, you know, the land is yours if you want it. As it is you should be doing something with your house. I'd love to see it be something there other than dirt and rocks myself." The large red-

haired man looked considering for a second.

“Yeah, you should do it. Just let me know what you need and when you’re ready.”

The women asked him questions about the wastelands, how dry it was, if he could get water there, then they explained how to start with grass to hold the soil, shrubs to break the wind and trees to pump water from the damp earth below, up near the surface so that other plants could use it. Focusing he relaxed and started memorizing what they said, the words becoming clearer to him as he listened, making more and more sense. It was what they planned for their own desert. It would be a garden soon.

Tor nodded his eyes half closed.

He needed seeds and workers. That and the land. It would work though. He could do it. Would do it. The idea just seemed right. Something inside him cried to him to try and fix the damage. After a moment he noticed everyone staring at him, so he shrugged.

“Sorry, I do that, lost in thought, creating a plan. Anyway, we’ll go and set that water flowing for you tomorrow. Is that all right? We can take some of your people or get them from other places if you want, so they can learn how to work all the equipment. Knowing how to do it yourselves is always better than having someone else do it for you. I think that’s true at least. We’ll do the initial work for you though, since it will be easier to do from the air and we have flying gear. I didn’t think to bring enough for your people... I can get you some if anyone wants? Just send word to me, later though, it will be a few months.” Everyone smiled and nodded affably. Really, they seemed happy enough to not have to fly, though Mutta spoke of its virtues with vigor.

He’d have to get her some flying gear and instruction then.

The door moved, a subtle shifting noted only because the air currents changed, and at first he didn’t really see anyone, even though the girl that stood there didn’t move at all. It was an eerie stillness that caught the attention, almost like she wasn’t real or something. A statue instead of a person. She was about fourteen from her look, as pale as he was, or nearly so, like him with a tan was probably closer. Her hair was straight and black and she was gorgeous, really just stunning. After looking at her for a second he realized who she looked like.

No, who she was, which was ridiculous.

Insane.

Plus a little freaky that he’d just been thinking about how good looking she was. Creepy. Icky really, so he blocked that part out of his mind. The power of meditation to the rescue. After focusing for ten seconds he was simply alert and ready.

Why would his mother have regressed her age that much, and be standing inside a hill in Afrak? More, she wore Afrak clothing and her hair was long, where his mother had cut hers like the Queen had to support the troops in the war effort. Finally she smiled and rushed across the room, hugging him tightly. It was familial, not amorous, so Tor hugged her back patting her shoulder a little. Taller than he was, so was his mother, but not this much. This woman was at least five-nine. Like Burks. Well.

She spoke in Afrak, her eyes happy and a smile on her lips.

"It is you Green? Is all well? Bring you news of our daughter and her family?"

Tor shook his head and then spoke, not certain a head shake meant the same thing here. Some things like that were just different, and Mutta hadn't gotten to them all yet, focusing on spoken language instead.

"No. I'm not Green. Notice how short I am? My name is Torrance Baker. I'm the one with the magic rivers? If I have this right, and if I don't then the world is more baffling than I can handle, the one you call "Green" is my grandfather. Burks Lairdgren?" Tor made a few mental leaps but it made sense so he continued.

"And since you look identical to my own mother and just asked if I had news of your daughter, I'd hazard to guess you're my grandmother? One I've always been told was dead? Interesting. I can see why though. Bad enough I look like Burks, at least he lives far away from me most of the time."

Ambassador Mutta nodded and smiled.

"Yes, this is the Gray!"

Of course she was. Tor nodded to the eerily still woman and smiled.

That only made sense, didn't it?

Chapter eleven

“You know, I think I'm being set up here.” Tor said in Noram standard to the woman that could easily have been his own mother. Probably was in the same way he was Burks. It was screwed up, but what could he do about it? The woman was family, so he'd deal no matter how bizarre the whole thing was. It's what you did.

She looked at him for a moment head tilted slightly as if asking a question, black hair shining, running like water over her right shoulder. The robe she wore was bright blue but a single color, not accentuating her figure at all. After a bit she smiled, a slightly doubting and bitter thing that he recognized as his mothers too. It was the one she gave him when he'd just said something stupid.

“Really? You mean to say that meeting your own grandmother, one you never met, in a far off land stretches your credulity? You make magic rivers for a living, and fly through the air with the power of a thought, and think that this is the hard to believe part? What am I supposed to do with you? Well, nothing for it now, you can't help it if you're a man, can you? Come have a seat and we'll invite your friends in, some at least. This place isn't big enough for all those unbalanced behemoths.” Brushing her hair to one side daintily she let her expression turn to something less aggressive.

“Tell me, what's the point of having over-sized humans like that anyway? They eat more, take up greater resources and only contribute war and aggression to the world. I always thought the Cordes program was a mistake, but then Noram always did go with the idea of bigger being better. Small people would have done more for them in the end I think. Well, too late now. They'll breed themselves down to a decent size in a few thousand years. That or kill each other off, which will work too.”

Tor sat, there was a pillow on the floor, a pink thing that reminded him a little of spun sugar. It seemed more cloud than seat but that didn't stop it from easily supporting his weight. After a moment Mutta led in part of the group, smiling and speaking softly as if they might be scared by all this. Well, it was a trap, but only one for him. Tor shrugged and turned his clothing to black combat leathers. If it was a fight, he'd try his best. It acted as a warning to the others, who all shifted their clothing to match his. Suddenly the woman in front of him clapped her hands. Tor expected an attack, but tea came instead, carried by a ebony skinned boy of about sixteen. He didn't make eye contact at all looking down the whole time and smiled, but it was like he was shy, that horrible kind of thing that made it hard to actually talk to people at all. Tor could relate but looking away right

now would be a poor plan. Ambassadors couldn't afford to be shy and retiring, could they?

"Everyone, Grandma. Grandma, everyone." Tor said his voice gaining a bit of a lilt suddenly, he couldn't say why, but he kept going.

"At least in part, we've been lured here, I think. I imagine they really do want the rivers too, otherwise they're going to be rather upset when we start senselessly flooding the middle of their continent." He stopped talking long enough to get a single, but very definite nod from Gray.

"So the question now is, why bring us here. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'd have come just to chat, but this seems a little more... doesn't it? If I'm imagining things, please do let me know. I can go and get an early nights rest instead of dealing with this then. First though, Gray is it? Do you have another name I can call you?"

The pause was long, drawn out and peppery, if that was possible. He literally smelled pepper in the air suddenly, after a moment the shields all turned on and started flaring purple. Flickers of light in the air, making thick clouds after less than a moment, each of his people glowing suddenly, brightly enough to cast shadows on the wall. It had started with his shield, but the others followed as if catching on to the threat as he did. That made sense. It was all deep mind stuff, so when his friends saw him reacting to a threat, they did too. If without having thought about it at all.

"Nanos?" He gave the very young looking Ancient girl in front of him a hard stare.

"Genetically modified viruses, not an attack at all. They simply cause a person to feel peaceful. A temporary effect that would last no more than three days. It isn't meant as an assault. It's just that your people are very aggressive and warlike. Plus, you in particular are probably feeling more than a little tense. Call it a bit of insurance, one that obviously isn't going to work. So, my name?" She looked like she struggled to remember something finally she spoke, her voice still far away.

"Lara Gray. Now just called Gray. I had you brought here because I need you to do something for me. It's nothing all that big, I need you to carry a letter for me. To Austra. It must arrive in four months time and be handed directly to Glost Serge the Prime Minister there. It must go with you, or Burks Green, and honestly I think your personal odds of survival are higher, but I can't promise anything there. Don't tell Burks I said that though or he'll insist that he's the only one that can do the job. Will you do that for me?" With barely a movement a letter on fine, thick paper, folded in three pieces and tied with leather, appeared in her right hand. She passed it to her left, a slow and careful movement, and stretched a little to hand it to him.

After a long pause Tor took it. Nothing happen, but he knew that it was a trick of some kind. If not one meant for him than for someone else. Probably. Glost Serge... he'd heard the name before. A schoolboy that had tried to kill his mother?

Tor spoke without setting the question up.

"Is that a family thing do you think? Everyone always trying to kill us for stupid reasons?" Rolph sat next to Sara and his sister, Trice next to Kolb and Wensa. Ursala bumped shoulders with Bonita, which was chummier than he'd thought they'd gotten, but then he'd been distracted. Lara tilted her head a little before speaking.

"I sometimes wonder. People have tried to kill me hundreds of times, and I can only think of about four that had valid reasons in the whole bunch. The most common being fear from a person that can't admit they're afraid. Anyway, that's what I want done and why I asked you here. So if that's out of the way, tell me about my daughter. If the letter isn't out of the way, please deal with that now."

It was his mother's voice and bossy tone, but magnified over time into something bitchy and off-putting, lacking the basic politeness Tor expected to find there, even as her voice lilted and sounded basically sensible. Not really friendly or playful, but businesslike while, clearly looking down at him for some reason. Burks didn't do that, so it wasn't just an effect of being old, Tor didn't think. No, this was just her.

Right. Well, going to the heart of an enemy power during a war, that seemed reasonable, didn't it? He nodded slowly to show thought, wondering if he'd really do it. It didn't seem likely, but a lot could change in four months.

Nodding again he smiled gently.

"I won't promise it, but if I think it can be done without getting me killed or hurting anyone, I'll try. If that's not good enough, then... I'm sorry?" It was, he hoped, a diplomatic and honest answer.

At least the Ancient woman nodded back.

"That's fine. I'm not trying to send you on a suicide mission. It's just a note that may help my daughter in time. Or not. It's all I have to give in the way of aid to her right now. We don't fight here you know."

Tor suspected that kind of aggression had been genetically removed from the people. They didn't fight... and they couldn't. What protected them from invaders he wondered? Or Tellerand missionaries. They were legendary for going where they weren't wanted and demanding that other people change their traditions and beliefs to match their own. He didn't have a chance to say anything about it, or ask, because Lara Gray started to ask questions about Laurali one right after the other. Obviously the conversation had changed, even if he wasn't ready to leave the current topic yet.

“Yeah, well if you want to know what she looks like, imagine you about ten years older looking. Or change and go look in a mirror, that should do it. Her hairs short right now though. Personality wise? She’s a bit... darker than you really, seems a little more sane most of the time, but she has her moments, oddball things... She doesn't seem to hate men as much as you do, but she does tend to act like were all a little dumber than we actually are. Is that part of your pattern? Genetics I mean? Eleven kids, which is too many, but seems to be to her personal plan, not an accident. I don't know what to say other than that.” It was his mother. What could he say?

You didn't insult your mother openly, especially to your grandmother.

A lot more could be said, it seemed, because if he wasn't asked three hundred questions in the next three hours... His butt fell asleep on the cushion and his legs started to tingle. It should have been fascinating, but this older version of his mother, with her vast experience was... strange and rude. Off-putting. Not just to him either. That could easily have been expected just based on the resemblance to his own mother. There was a constant feeling that she was just barely able to put up with Tor as a person and the other men clearly angered her even more with their presence. It wasn't anything she said, exactly. Mainly in the tense way she ignored them and seemed irritated by everything they said or did. Even when they had additional information she wanted and asked for.

Rolph jovially recalled speaking to Laurali and Douglass not two weeks before, how pleased Lara's daughter was with Tor and what he'd managed to accomplish, and her other children. How Timon was going to start school the next year at the new Printer Academy, even though he would be only twelve then, and Tiera was to go to Lairdgren the year after.

The Ancient looked like she wanted to backhand the Prince where he sat. It was obvious enough that he gave her a strained smile and stopped speaking after only a minute or so, his words tapering awkwardly. A bit later talking about the river placement, Kolb produced a map and pointed to what he meant in his description of where things were to be placed. Lara sighed loudly, and asked him to stop nattering, because the ladies were trying to discuss important matters. Kolb folded up the map and put it away, his ire obviously up at least a bit, easily seen by the tense set of his jaw and shoulders. After that things just kept getting worse.

She kept it up the whole time, not sparing any of the men at all and saying derisive things about them as if they were too dumb to notice it. If she'd been drinking they could have written it off, maybe, but her tea smelled like leaf water, nothing stronger and she didn't

slur her words or anything of that nature, she just kept on insulting the men.

Even the women with them started to get worked up after a while, shifting uneasily and going pale several times, like when she implied that the Prince might be mentally defective, or that Kolb's best possible service to the world would be learning to sew and service his wife in bed. Finally Tor knew he had to either leave now and go back to the ship for the night for some sleep, or go and leave, never to come back. Hopefully his own mother aged more... sanely. This woman in front of him seemed almost like she wanted to push them into going to war or at least into killing her.

It was looking close to that really. And she wondered why people always tried to kill her?

No wonder the whole land was messed up, if she'd been riding men like that for millennium non-stop. She wouldn't have been happy breaking their spirits either, she wouldn't rest until she broke their very patterns, which had probably been what happened to them all. Finally, almost reluctantly, Tor had to call her on it. It wasn't polite or kind of him, or very diplomatic, but it needed to be said for his own peace of mind. Besides, She'd basically been declaring war on Noram for over an hour by insulting Rolph like that. Kolb may be mad, and Tor felt a little put out himself, a lot really, but saying things like that about the heir to the throne was insanely stupid. Rolph kept his cool, but it was starting to become difficult to ignore.

"I'm sorry, but you really have some incorrect ideas about men Lara. Real ones I mean, not ones broken by your genetic tampering to sap their will and damage their intelligence so that you can live in your little fantasy world where you and your "daughters" live the perfect life. I have to tell you that if you degrade and deride even ten percent of your population as a culture, then your culture is ill and going to fail in the end." His voice was, surprisingly enough, calm and matter of fact, not angry or pissy sounding.

She looked shocked. Like he'd thrown his beverage at her or tipped the table over.

"What? I don't know what you're talking about. Men are treated as total equals here." The list she gave them, describing what men did to prove her point, was a joke. The home making and child rearing parts were the highlight. Really the only valid work they were allowed. Even their hobbies were controlled to a degree that made him squirm. Knot tying? Most of the men practiced decorative rope work... Not a bad thing, but it was almost all they were allowed to do for fun, that and weaving goat silk or tending the herds.

"You honestly can't see it? Just totally blind to it? Right in front of you and..." Tor waved a hand in front of his own face, past his

eyes. "Nothing? You've led an entire part of the world to hate an entire gender, and I mean to the point of severely abusive behavior and it isn't that you justify it, or try to explain, you can't even see that you're doing it at all? I'm certain you aren't stupid, probably the smartest person in Afrak... so... are you insane? Have you simply lived so long in your own world, one of your personal making, that you can't understand that things could be done differently?"

Tor rose and began to walk out.

"I can't change your culture, or order you to respect your own people, but I can insist you don't insult people, men in this case, who came across half the world to help you do something you haven't managed on your own for a thousand years or more. If you can't bring yourself to apologize to mere men for your behavior, we'll just leave in the morning."

Tor dropped the letter on the table and walked out. If she'd just insulted him he could have swallowed it, but she'd been insulting his friends. By insulting and questioning Rolph like that, she was insulting Noram directly too. If what they had to offer wasn't worth basic politeness, then they could leave. Maybe go to Soam. They were supposed to be incredibly polite there, if a little odd. Whatever, it would work out. Tor started setting up his carriage so Kolb, Wensa and Trice did the same. They were all pushing the size limits of the craft, but it would work.

"Court Jester! Court Jester! Tor! Wait, please! I... I came to apologize for the elder, the old sometimes forget their manners, things change and they fail to adapt, I... don't want to lose the rivers. No one else in the world has them or anything close at all. Without them this project won't start, possibly not for another thousand years." Her voice was plaintive and he thought of her as a friend, but the matter wasn't about her at all. So he had to shake his head.

"Mutta, you don't even think I made the rivers, do you? You can just go to Noram and find the woman who did then, and ask her couldn't you?" His tone wasn't accusing, just suggestive, as if it were a real option instead of basically telling her to go on a wild goose chase. He was tired of these people already though. Who brought someone across the world to do things for them and then just insulted them, over and over again?

His own family apparently.

Lovely.

Violence not happening there or not, she still clenched her fists in frustration. Tor looked at her and then at her hands. Finally she looked down and gasped slightly, clearly embarrassed by her own implied threat. Tor shrugged.

"It's never fun to hear you and your whole culture has holes in it.

They all do, just like everyone has weak spots. But... seriously, you've seen our culture and how women are treated and you saw that in there. Do you think we can be anything but insulted right now? Wouldn't you be? Tell me that if the roles were reversed you'd have been fine with it, and mean it, and I'll get up in the morning and go start working on those rivers, even if no one else will." Arms crossed and head tilted he waited for a denial or more protests, something.

Instead she sighed.

"Have you ever tried leading a stubborn most Ancient being around and make her apologize? She's never been like this before, not even with the Tellerand, and they're hard to deal with, always insisting others pray and fast as they do and take up their ways. Please... Court Jester, give me some time to get to the bottom of this before you leave? I've worked too hard, for my entire life, to have a fit of anger ruin it now, yours or hers. I'll make her apologize. Can you meet us here in the morning before you ready to go? I'll be going with you to set up the rivers." The voice went matter of fact then. Confident as if she knew for a fact that Gray would be doing as she'd promised.

Everyone else stood around looking at them, Rolph had good control of his face, but Karina and Trice looked ready to hit someone and Wensa actually fingered her weapons in the small cloth pouch on her right hip. One of the male Royal Guards held a force lance in his hand and faced a growing crowd of women, no, Tor realized there were men too, peeking shyly from the back of the group, looking at them through their long lashes. There were men here, it was just that they were all so docile, so gentle, that he mistook them for women.

A prejudice of his own? Probably. Tor would have to reconsider his thinking on the topic then. After all he knew Wensa, Trice and Karina... and all the women with Kolb, those in the Royal Guard, even the Queen... Most of the women he knew were anything but docile.

Fine, he'd fix himself then.

Take the person for who they were alone. It wasn't the easiest way to do things, but who ever said the easy way was best?

Nothing wrong with not being an overbearing jerk, of course, and he couldn't fault the men here for being what Lara and her family had created. That he was her family too bothered him a little. She was overbearing, pushy about it and couldn't see that her own way might not be the only way. In other words, she was his mother.

Tor winced visibly, which caused half the people behind him to tense up and ready themselves to fight and Mutta to take notice. The crowd missed it all, but then, as pointed out, they didn't have violence. A single Noram child with a stick could have cowed the whole lot of them without even landing a blow.

“Fine. We'll be here in the morning and ready to go to work. I won't really insist that your life's work hinge on the whims or convoluted plans of my own grandmother, but... seriously Mutta... she tried to infect a peaceful delegation with something, including two members of the royal family! I'm kind of surprised that Wensa and Kolb didn't kill her on the spot. That's an act of war, you know that don't you? She needs to do something to make that right. I'd suggest vast amounts of bowing and scraping. She's old enough to have gotten past her own ego by now, if not I suggest she learn quickly.” Sighing he shook his head.

“I'm the wrong person for this job aren't I? She's basically my own mother and you know, I love my mother, but she isn't always the easiest person in the world. That has to be in her field pattern too, because Lara is exactly the same! Only worse. Frustrating old bat. And yes, feel free to tell her I said all that. If she wants to fight with me over all this, that's fine, we're family and have to put up with each other, but taking off after Prince Alphonse was stupid and taunting Kolb... well, just point out to her that it was a mistake and she should know better.”

The Ambassador, the other Ambassador, stood grinning.

Right, he'd told her that he wouldn't really withhold the rivers. That may be simple truth, but it didn't mean he'd be happy about it, or do it without making her life difficult. Everyone else had loaded into the carriages already, all decked out in fantastic colors, except Trice's which was a dead looking flat black. It went with the ship well, if not her personality. Trice had always struck him as a bright blue person that way.

“I will see to fixing things Ambassador Baker.” The small dark woman said, bowing low to him.

He stuck out his tongue.

“Stop that. You're what, my aunt? Cousin?”

She shook her head with a slightly amazed look. Probably that he was being so dense. That or the fact that he finally put together that her family name was “Gray” just in a different language?

“No... I'm your great niece. Though also your cousin.”

Of course she was.

Tor gave her a quick bow and told her they'd be back at first light trying not to sound like he wanted to kill someone. Ambassadors didn't do that, did they? Not good ones.

Back on the ship everyone exploded. Nearly at least. The huge scary Baron, Havor people called him. That could be either his first or last name, or the sound you made when he crushed your spine. Tor didn't know. The enraged giant stormed around complaining about how the Afrak women had kept staring at him and poking his

stomach. One even tried to look at his teeth, as if he were a horse and another had tried taking his trousers down for some reason.

Tor had to admit it sounded off-putting in the extreme. Most of the royals, even the women were visibly angry. A few with him, for saying they'd put in the rivers anyway. The Royal Guards didn't complain, they just stood back and watched. As if nothing mattered as long as they didn't have to defend the Prince or Prince's. But then they were used to being considered second class citizens weren't they? Furniture in the background. Useful, but not counted as important most of the time. Sara, with her merchant background didn't seem overly put out either.

"Sara, you seem to be the calmest one here, that isn't armed openly at least, thoughts?" They needed rationality now, didn't they? This girl may have seen something he'd missed, she was smart, Tor knew, and often got things he didn't. She was, among other things, a highly trained observer.

"This culture is screwed up, the men... I don't know what's wrong with them, but they're different than ours. A lot. Mainly the same size or smaller than the women. Still, is the way they're treated all that different than how the nobles treat the commoners back home? The assumption that one group is superior, should be giving the orders and making the demands? Pretty familiar isn't it? It's based on gender here rather than social rank, but how different is that really? Something totally beyond the individual's ability to change being used to assign position."

Ah.

It was a good point, Tor had to nod, even as the large royals milled around and fumed, a few of the men looked ready to lash out physically, which was scaring Ali more than a bit. She slipped to the side of the deck, away from everyone else. Since no one was noticing her overly he went and took her hand in his, getting a small scared look for his trouble. She didn't speak, but Sara was busily standing her ground in the middle of the deck, facing off with a group of three giants who were arguing that she was wrong. They seemed intent on proving that they weren't entitled and overbearing jerks by looming over her and basically ordering that she change her mind.

Because that made sense, didn't it?

Tor kissed the girl on the cheek and asked her to stay there, just in case things got tense, and walked back to his pretty blond friend. Hearteningly Rolph did the same. If anyone got mad and attacked, Tor wouldn't have to fight alone at least. It wouldn't come to that, he hoped. Too many hard feelings could be built that way, fast. Sara stared up at the larger people, her gaze taking in all the extra tall people.

“Really, you don't do that? We don't do that? I've heard all of you talking in the past week you know. I've been groped, fondled, and ordered into bed by at least six of you, and if I didn't have the heir to Noram himself running interference I would have had to do it. When Tor only made oats one night, half of you wanted to order him to remake the whole meal by himself... And he's a noble, with rank as high or higher than most of you, the Ambassador and a wizard! He could make the whole boat go away with a thought, make all our magic not work and leave us in the middle of the ocean! You all just look at his height and forget that. The subconscious assumption that those you perceive as being beneath you really are is no different here with the Afrak women. You're just upset because it's happening to you this time.”

It was a good thought. It certainly had a ring of truth to it, didn't it?

The nobles didn't like hearing it, but the Royal Guard didn't blink, living that kind of thing all the time. Tor wondered if he did that to people too? He didn't think so, but decided to make a point of looking for it from now on. Change had to start with you, or it likely wouldn't happen.

People still wanted to be worked up, reasonable speech from his friend or not, so Petra called over Kolb and Wensa and had them put their people to bed.

Without dinner.

That wasn't so much a punishment as the fact that nothing had been made, but it still drove home the point when one of the men, a minor noble of some kind that had batted Tor around a time or two in practice, one always heavy on the stick or blade tending to leave bruises, told Tor to just go and make them all something to eat. He said it as if he really hadn't been paying attention at all. Ordered him too, more than a little gruffly, to tell the truth, grumpy from the conversation and hunger no doubt. The man didn't even bother to add a please to the end as an afterthought. Or offer to help with the work. David Derring walked over and hit him in the back of the head. A full punch too. That it landed meant the man had gone to a strange land without his shield on. After less than a seconds pause David hit him again for good measure.

“Moron. Were you not just standing here the whole time? Damn, we really are that bad aren't we? Gods.” The tall thin man with his very short light brown hair and combat leathers stormed off, to bed most likely, that having been the suggestion.

Sara looked at him and rolled her eyes, and Kolb, for the first time Tor ever remembered, looked... embarrassed. That probably wouldn't go well for the hungry guy. Tor grabbed Sara by the hand on

the way past and walked her to her room without speaking, glaring a little at the tall people filing in around them. They'd been demanding she perform for them sexually? Tor could see it, she was cute and fit, and to their minds her short height meant fair game. Socially she was... actually the lowest ranked person in the whole crew. Even he was higher up, if only technically. Ali was actually a Counserina too, by birth. He shook his head getting a funny look from his friend.

"What is it Tor, are you alright?" She looked slightly worried, so he grinned to reassure her, his go to move when he wasn't shrugging.

"I was just realizing I'm not the lowest ranked person on the ship, or in the world. I... it's hard for me to remember that kind of thing. I just always kind of assume it."

The statement got a kiss as a reply. Then she asked if he wanted to come in for a while... given everything he didn't think he really should, in case she was just trying to make him feel better with sex, but she wrinkled her nose cutely and pulled him in anyway.

"It's that stuff Trice told me about isn't it? How you don't see yourself correctly and can't really help it? If you were in a room with a dozen pot washers you'd think your social position was about the same, right? Or a dozen King's, so at least there's that. It's bizarre really. Alphonse has told me more than once about how you've stood in the presence of the whole royal family and traded barbs with some of the highest councilors in the land, but you still always act so humble and demure the rest of the time. Amazing."

Then, thankfully she started kissing him, which led to other things. He slept in her room for about five hours before he forced himself up to make breakfast. He was draggably tired, but happy enough about it. Sara was sweet and gentle with him, compared to Karina who was always a bit physical and dominating, or Ursala, who was always fun and interesting but not that warm. It wasn't that he minded that, but with Sara he felt... loved. With Trice too, but she had a different feel about what she did, more urgent, more about the moment. Tor could feel that Sara wanted something long term when she touched him, not just a few moments of pleasure.

Tor nodded. He was unconsciously reading her field. Everyone did it all the time, so it wasn't that damaging, and he was getting his field cohesion back pretty well, so it wasn't really a worry that way anymore. That was a good thing.

Still, he needed to spend more time with Alissa, even if Sara was kind of more interesting to him at the moment. They were to be married and he intended to go through with it, even if Count Derring was out of the picture by then. She was young, but needed someone that would stand for her all the time and really, there were worse reasons. Still, that didn't mean he couldn't love other people too. Same

went for her though.

Could he do that? It wasn't what he was trained to really, but then, Two Bends was, he began to realize, a fiction for him. His mother had always seemed to fit in, but had she really? There had always been subtle things, the constant bathing for instance, that set them all apart, the good table manners she instilled and now that he thought about it, she'd always favored the girls a bit over the boys. More than a bit.

It wasn't a big thing, a lot of mothers did that there, the men were more responsible for the boys, since they were the example of what they needed to grow into. That just made sense. But his mom was pretty bad about it even for Two Bends. Tor had always shared in all the chores, but when he stopped to think about it he was pushed into more of the home duties than Terlee had ever been. More washing and cooking for the family, and he'd cared for the younger kids a lot more too, as well as other things. Terlee had done a lot and volunteered to help, being a good sister, so he'd never noticed really, but mom hadn't required it of her. Was that the whole genetic thing then? The idea was unsettling and made him realize that he had to keep his mother out of power at all costs in Noram. The idea of their broken system merging with Afrak's frightened him a little. It would end up with a bunch of tall women treating little men as slaves and worse. The idea shook him for a bit, causing a slight shudder before he grinned.

She wasn't really that bad. Not like Lara. Maybe it was growing up with relative equality as far as genders went that did it? Tor hoped so. If granny Lara was what she was going to become, Tor didn't want to see it. Was he going to become Burks then? That wasn't so bad, he was a good guy, if a little strange at times, but willing to serve others, high position or not, and he let others rule. Lara, Tor thought without real proof, seemed to lead Afrak directly. Burks didn't force himself to the front nearly as much.

No, he led from behind the scenes, in secret.

Heh.

Breakfast held some surprises for him, after he started the early baking, making a lot more bread than normal. That and thick, flat, oil crackers for later, batch after batch, dashing about trying to make pancakes and eggs for the actual meal at the same time. At about five, some helpers actually came in. Seven of them, five men and two women, all clearly having been beaten more than a little. A few still had darkening bruises on their tired faces and several limped. One of them Tor recognized as the hungry guy from the night before.

"Alright," He pointed a spoon that he was stirring batter with at the man. "Grab four of the fresh loaves and divide them in half

please... You, miss... Dara is it? If you'd go to the large cooler and get a pot of butter? Top left shelf. You can eat something before you start so you won't feel ill around the food, but hurry, we don't have a lot of time today."

He worked without hesitating to much, not having time to slow down really, and after a few minutes of hungry gulping one of the men, shorter than the rest looked at him guiltily. After swallowing the mouthful of warm bread and half melted butter he spoke softly. Tor had to stop and walk out of the kitchen to really hear him. He stood in the doorway holding a large bowl of pancake batter, stirring it with a long wooden spoon.

"Kolb took after us. All at once, and with our shields on... Figured out a shield overlap technique. I need to learn that. Mainly for trying to boss Sara into bed. I guess I need to go and apologize to her for that today, before we leave. Um, if I've personally wronged you, I apologize and promise to try and fix it in the future." He bowed, a seated one, so he didn't really think he'd wronged Tor personally, it was more about making sure he seemed polite.

The others chimed in, but the hungry guy actually got onto his knees and bowed low.

"I know I have, I forgot my place... sir. I cannot beg of you to forgive me, I don't deserve it. I simply ask that my punishment not be delivered unto others not to blame."

It was a good apology and as much as he could, the man seemed to mean it. Tor wondered if he thought that he was going to go after his family for it or something? That phrasing was the one that the nobles used when trying to prevent wars, Tor had come to realize. Basically saying that they'd sacrifice themselves to save their people, if it was required. Maybe he thought Tor would punish everyone else here by not fixing food for them? That seemed more likely. He helped the man up quickly enough, not wanting to draw his humiliation out.

"OK, well, those of you that have apologies to make to Sara should see to it after breakfast, after all that's way worse than just trying to order up some dinner... For now let's get to fixing food and then securing the kitchen and making packages of travel fare. We have to have every one fed and ready to fly in three hours." The timing was arbitrary, but the flight would take most of the day and he wanted actual work to start before dark. They could camp out if need be, he even had houses to hold them all for comfort, in a little box in his cabin, but things were likely to get hard fast if they didn't have at least some water coming in the first day.

Tor didn't really have to pack much, just load up the rivers and equipment from Mutta's room for her and make up a small bag with grooming gear for his own comfort. He had the rest of what he needed

around his neck, except food. The Ambassador was in charge of that. What he was bringing was just in case she forgot at first.

His great niece...

The idea was odd, but family was, in the end, foisted upon you without your consent, even in the best of cases. At least Mutta was sane. Tor really wasn't sure about Lara Gray yet.

After he ate and set people to putting things away properly for the week or longer they'd be gone, Tor took Kolb, Rolph and Karina to the dock, expecting to have to either wait on Lara, or just leave disappointed. What he saw in the distance was that two people stood, one dressed in drab gray, the other brilliant colors. Closing in he noticed that one had to be Lara, being as pale as she was. The other turned out to not be Mutta, but the older woman with bright blue hair and orange cat slit eyes. The look was so exotic that Tor couldn't help but remember her, even though they hadn't exchanged names.

When they landed and climbed out neither moved for a long while. Then Lara came at him like an evil creature of legend. For a half second Tor wondered if she was going to try and attack him physically. He wore a shield and was well armed, if it came to that, but it would be hard to fight her, even if she was bitchy and mean. After all, she was his grandmother and looked exactly like his mom, and really, his little sister Tiera too. Exactly like both of them. Tor just hoped he was wrong in that thought about his little sister. Three of this beast would be too much for the world to take.

"How dare you embarrass me like that! This is my land, not yours and we don't need some outsider coming in to tell us how to live! If it weren't for the fact that we need your forsaken magic rivers I'd kick you all out today and never let you return! I can't remember the last time I was so angry, so mortified by the actions of another person! To think you're my own flesh and blood too. It was a mistake ever agreeing to try Greens experiment, I can see that now. You're exactly like him! Exactly! Always coming here and telling me that I mistreat men and acting like I should bow to his ways! If I didn't know your genetics better than I know my own I'd think you were a moron instead of one of the smartest people on the planet. I should have insisted that Laurali only have girls like I did! The world doesn't need two green men, always trying to improve energy distribution and being so self-effacing every single moment of their lives. Humph!" She stomped her foot, the right one, in the same way his mother always did before she started laughing at the end of similar fits. It was, more or less, an act, Tor understood. Meant to cow, but also let people know that she wasn't truly angry.

Rolph looked shocked and pale, a bad sign that Lara probably didn't really get, the possible start of combat rage. Kolb had turned

red and looked ready to explode and Karina stood stock still, one hand on something in a pocket as if ready to draw a weapon. It had all been directed at Tor though, the harangue, so he shrugged and crossed his arms, tapping his right foot at the Ancient woman that looked a lot like his little sister. The idea made him stop for a second again. She might have the whole Ancient field pattern too, but was she also a copy of Lara? Another copy? Eek. If that was the case he needed to get her away from home as soon as possible and start teaching her to be a bit more accepting of others.

“Alright Granny, vented your spleen properly and all that? Now, apologize to the nice royal family and the hardened warrior that could possibly rip a small hole in your continent by himself and then come give us all a hug and we'll be on our way to set up your nice little prezzies.” His grin was sudden and disarming.

Gray froze for a second, a darkness behind her eyes lifting, then she sighed, as if horribly put upon by the world. She finally smiled a bit, but the look was off somehow. Not as focused as what he was used to seeing in his mother. A little dreamy perhaps. Like a person in love might have.

“Tsk. That Green charm. I never could resist it. Fine then. I apologize for my lapses, please forgive me. I'm old and sometimes forget that I don't actually rule the whole world. Even though, clearly, I should.” She swept them a low bow and before anyone could say anything rushed forward to hug him.

“Take the letter anyway?” She asked, her mouth pressed nearly to his ear. He nearly shook her off then, since he could feel the dampness of her breath on his skin and that was way too intimate an action coming from a family member. He was already going to have to have a fight with Burks about this whole mess. Possibly a physical one, which would mean a beating for him of course. He didn't want to mention it out loud, because it was all so embarrassing. Sure, the patterns were different, but Lara was essentially Burks' sister. Maybe not by blood, but close enough. She definitely was Tor's direct grandmother though and she was holding him like a lover.

Gah.

“Fine, but same as I said last night. Only if I can deliver it safely. I also don't guarantee the time perfectly either. Could be two months, could be eight years.” Tor Shrugged.

She handed it over and started making the rounds of everyone else with hugs. Well, at least it wasn't him anymore, he decided, as she managed to press up against all the others the same way. Maybe that was just how they hugged here? He hadn't seen anything like it, and the one he'd gotten the night before from her had been far less cuddly when she'd thought he was Burks, so Tor didn't know what to

think.

Mutta, dressed in brown work clothes that looked a lot like his own student browns from school, drove up in a large wagon heaped with evenly sized boxes, bare wood crates. Two strange and huge animals pulled it all, like cows only about five times heavier and with massive horns coming out of the sides of their heads. They were a pleasant dark brown with black on the underside and looked really sturdy.

She waved at them as she hopped down. She half hugged the blue haired woman as she walked by.

“Tor, this is my mother Fiaria Mutta. Your niece. Everything went well then? I don't see any blood. Here, I brought food for the week!”

It didn't look like a enough to Tor, having recently tried stocking enough food for the trip. It had gone just as fast as he'd thought. There was a little waste, but not much, since the big people were always at least a little hungry it seemed. Mutta assured him that these high energy rations would sustain them all very well. Tor grinned. It sounded like they'd taste horrible when she described them, bars of animal fat pressed with nuts and seeds, dried meat and a bit of dried fruit added for flavor. Yum. Everything you needed in a hot desert environment.

Well, he'd eaten giant sea insects so these couldn't be psychologically harder to eat at least.

He pulled one of the magic chests out and resized it to match the wagon, then he and Rolph started unloading. Kolb moved to help, but apparently Lara wasn't done apologizing to him, since she took him by the arm and held him in place. It was fair enough, since of everyone not related, she'd been rudest to the large bald man.

Playing with maps and nattering?

God. That was the entire plan he'd had on the table and if Kolb hadn't done half the work plotting the actual river courses alone it was because he'd done more than that. The Ancient woman almost managed abject when talking to him in particular. Good. At least the bald and scared man wouldn't have to go to war with these people by himself.

The scary part there was that he just might be able to win. Against an entire people.

That could explain the extra effort Tor realized. Lara not wanting to risk something like that. She knew that he wouldn't get mad at her and then attack her people over it, probably as well as anyone knew anything about him at all. She'd grown up with Burks after all hadn't she? The Prince she'd kind of dismissed for some reason, as foolish as that was, since Rolph could probably take on her continent too, but Kolb, he could do anything, couldn't he?

Everyone else started working too, even Karina, who wasn't lazy by nature. Still, loading and unloading carts seemed like a place she'd have drawn a line really. Just about the lowest manual labor possible. At least in the world of a Noram royal. She didn't even blink, just getting to work instantly. The boxes weren't big, but must have weighed forty pounds each, the raw wood giving them all splinters, he could tell, because everyone kept stopping to try and pull them, working at them with their teeth or fingernails. The work went quickly, there were only about twenty boxes, and the trunk he'd expanded let them all fit easily enough. He had to climb inside to organize things, but... a tiny wizard in a box, who didn't like that? Karina mentioned it, but with that wicked grin she used when she plotted some kind of sexual misadventure for him.

He pointed at her. Rudely.

"Don't. Whatever you're thinking, no."

"No promises. The girls on the ship are getting restless." She kept working and looking at him with a grin when she thought he couldn't see. He could feel it though.

Fiaria talked with Mutta as they worked, commenting on everything in that way only mothers and people that didn't know you understood them could. So, Tor reflected, honestly, but without a lot of tact? That sounded about right.

"So the pretty one with long hair is my uncle? Good thing you told me, I don't see the family resemblance at all. He does look a bit like mother, that lovely pale look, and their hair is the same. If you hadn't mentioned it, I would have made an offer for him. You need a husband to care for you too dear, you work too hard. The big one isn't bad either, either of them, though Gray seems to be trying for the one with no hair. What kind of price do you think we'd have to offer for the copper haired one?" With a head nod she indicated Rolph.

Mutta lifted a box and then stopped to pull a splinter after handing it off to Tor.

"Honestly? Well, if he wasn't already spoken for, I think I could pass myself off as being royalty from here, even though we don't have that. Close enough really, our ranks are about the same, actually I'm probably equal to the girl there by their system of thinking. Second in line. They wouldn't require anything of us then, but I'd have to move there. He's to run the whole land one day. Not for a time though, the rulers of Noram tend to step down when the heir reaches forty or so, as a tradition, and he's only eighteen, I think."

The mother clicked, a unique thing that had taken Mutta half a day to teach him to do properly, It required causing suction at the back of the mouth and then freeing the tongue from the roof. In this case it basically meant something was funny, like a chuckle, Tor

thought. That had been a little hard for him to pick up, since there was no direct analog in Noram.

“Crazy! I suppose we should make an offer then, if the large boy isn't married yet. They'll need someone sensible like you to help him if that's all they have to lead them. A man... hard to understand these tall people.”

“Mother! He's spoken for already. I don't know, but that may be unbreakable there... not like here where anyone could come in with a better offer up to the day of signing.” She didn't seem put off by the idea, she just didn't know what the rules were.

Tor kept a smile off his face and answered in Afrak, the language a lot easier now that he'd heard others speaking it so often. It felt like he should have known it all along almost, which just pointed out how stupid he was, taking that long to learn it.

“Well, It's not impossible, so an offer might be a good plan. After all, if you point out that Mutta is that high ranking here, which I don't think anyone knew before, it will improve the deal, and you're certainly pretty enough. His current betrothed is already married, but to a man that doesn't exist. Technically Alphonse and Ursala can't be married until that man dies, which should be any time now honestly. If you act fast though there's a time window for you, a few months. If you're serious, write up a letter and I'll take it to his mother.” Tor held up his hand.

“And yes, the part about her being married to an imaginary man is real. There was a problem and they needed a fictional marriage to fix it. It's no longer a problem though, so I wouldn't wait too long.” That had been Ursala's pregnancy, but she'd lost the child due to poison.

Austran poison.

They chattered back and forth excitedly for a bit, the tone alternately playful and serious. Well. It wasn't just idle chatter then? Good enough. He loved Ursala, but Mutta was family. If he could help her out he had to.

It was a rule.

It meant having to find a husband for the Countess too, probably, but that should be doable. She was wonderful after all. Maybe his younger brother Todd? He was only a year younger than Tor was, so seventeen now, if he hadn't found a girl for himself, that would work. He was good looking and pretty bright even. True, the boy was more interested in baking than most of the others, so he might actually want to skip the whole “being royal” thing, but who was to say he couldn't do both? He'd have to send a letter to his mom and ask her what that situation was then. Blinking Tor realized the Todd was even a Countier, so well within the three social steps that royals required

for their marriages.

When they left from the ship, Mutta sat in the comfortable blue cushioned seat behind Tor making eyes at Rolph so obviously that the Prince finally asked what it was about. He smiled when he asked and his tone was polite, playful, as if he half expected a joke, but he was curious, that much was clear. Tor shrugged and Mutta smiled up at the giant red haired Prince, his color having finally returned to normal.

She didn't say anything though, looking down instead, so Tor did.

"It turns out that Ambassador Mutta is roughly a Princess here, about the same as Karina is. Possibly a little more than that. Her mom is basically the heir, the structure is different, but that's about the size of things. So she and her mother are planning to send a go between. Me actually, to plead for your hand. It's a good match and I think she's serious. She's already agreed to move there full time and everything. Worth entertaining the offer, I'd say. You already know each other even, and you have to admit, her exotic looks alone would make it an intriguing idea. Plus she's really smart and already has training in leadership too." If a foreign kind that would take some rounding out. In Noram she'd have to learn to accept that men were equals, which might be hard for her, but if anyone from Afrak could do it, Tor would place his gold on her.

One of the great things about Rolph, Tor thought, was how open and kind he really was. He reached out and took her hand gently and smiled.

"Please do! The offer is kind and welcome. I'll speak to my mother for it, if you want?"

They chatted about agreements and plans for the rest of the trip and if the Prince wasn't enthused by the idea Tor couldn't tell at all. Being daring he reached out and felt the attraction blossoming between them. It was incredible to sense like that, a warm feeling that made him like both of them better too. He broke off before he started making them both feel that way about him by accident. That would be awkward all around.

Very awkward.

The trip took ten hours, Wensa and her crew moving to the first installation route without pausing, setting the whole thing up before the original site was reached at all. Tor and a few others would have to start digging the return river as fast as possible and probably end up doing it in the dark. It was stupidly dangerous, but they needed water.

The second he landed Tor jumped out and grabbed the box in the back with the earth moving equipment. The small stones with their leather thongs attached to the back of either hand he hit the flight

control sigil and started digging. The right hand had to point out where the earth was and start the stream, the left pointed up slightly and out, making a huge dust cloud. It was the only way he could fly and not crash while making the earth moving equipment work too. The river of dirt flying through the air was impressive, but Tor kept feeling like he was about to die. The whole thing was just so unstable doing it this way.

It hit him that the flying carriages could be used for it with some modification, so the operator wouldn't have to fly themselves at the same time, but that would have to come the next day, the river was flowing towards them already, he knew, Wensa had waved to him in signal as she and her group had flown past, about half a mile away on his right. It was a constant balancing act and the amount of dust made it hard to see the ground at times, but this first line only had to go to an existing river half way to the coast that should carry the flow well enough. It was summer here, Mutta had said, so the water flow was lower than normal. That meant there shouldn't be any severe flooding. Tor hoped so anyway.

The work was fast, messy, and accompanied the whole time by a terrifying sound of thunder that made Tor want to wet himself at first, and feel like he couldn't control the forces involved at all. It was like fear itself lived in the deep, loud rumble. He got used to it though. Most things in life were like that, weren't they? Do it long enough and you started to think of something as normal.

Hours later he found himself flying back in the dark, not knowing if he could find the camp at all. Being a flat sandy desert for the most part, a fine dust rather than real sand, the few lights put out guided him in perfectly, and he descended so slowly that he barely tapped the hard ground under his feet when he landed. Being focused really helped. So did the fact that he knew for certain there were no trees to crash into and, while it would be embarrassing, if he landed on one of the Not-houses that had been set up, it wouldn't hurt anything either. Other than his pride.

Tor was glad he'd managed to find a flat piece of earth though.

The water got there half an hour later and everyone rushed to hook up the water pumps on the little houses to the stream that was equal in flow to the secret river that ran to the military bases north of the Capital. Tor was supposed to get word from the King on that as soon as he heard a report that it existed. Either that had been forgotten or the whole kingdom needed to freak out, that river was huge and nearly twice the flow of the King's river. Someone had to have noticed it and reported by now, didn't they? The flight training school would be getting almost all their water from it for goodness sakes. They'd be flying over it daily too.

Maybe they just didn't know it was supposed to be reported officially?

All the houses had been set up, but no one had bothered to save a spot for Tor. At least no one ran out to wave him in. He could have walked into any of them and demanded a place, of course, he literally owned them all, but it didn't matter. Tor just found a spot and dug through the faintly clicking amulets on his neck, the noise of stone and in a few cases metal clanking together as he found and untangled the right one.

An emergency house.

The idea was simple enough, it was basically a tent, meant for situations like this, or even ones where you had to hide. His flight from Ward with everyone in tow had spurred the idea in him. It was about ten feet across and hid itself by blending with the surrounding environment, pretending to be a small hill. In this case one made of dirt. That was the real point. You didn't have to build the disguise yourself, so that if you were tired, working in the dark, or just not artistic, you could still vanish into it almost seamlessly. There was a bed inside and a dry toilet, as well as a little shower that could be hooked up to water, letting a holding tank fill and then the water line would shut off to hide itself, only turning back on to keep the tank filled. It was basic, black and brown inside, the ceiling glowing softly so he could see everything. Once the water was hooked up he showered and headed to bed. Then at a single touch to a sigil on the wall, things went dark.

The light increased when daylight hit, signaling it was time for all good little bakers to be up for the day. No cooking today, of course, but he wanted to try reconfiguring the carriages and see if that would work out at all. No one else was up, so he made a flat platform, small, just big enough for one giant to stand on, inside a strong cage that came to his shoulders. It had to be that high for the larger people, though he could use it by putting his hands through the bars if it came to that. Almost directly underneath the cage, a little to the front for visibility was the drivers station. He made it bright pink so that it would be easy to see in the air. Good enough. Now he just had to get someone to try it. His vote this time was Trice, who was a better magic carriage driver than he was, along with one of the guys slated to do the excavation work anyway. Looking around he saw a sleepy looking Trice walk out of a stone house with several contented looking men following her.

Really, it didn't take a genius to figure out what had been going on in there. Well, at least those guys wouldn't be all sexually frustrated the whole time. Seeing him she ran over and gave him a hug.

“Tor! You made it back. We were all a bit worried about you. What's the plan?”

Food first, then try the new idea he had, he shared with her, accepting a kiss on the lips hoping she'd brushed her teeth at least after doing whatever she had with all those guys. It wasn't a disease problem, sexual diseases hadn't survived the great change, which was probably due to genetic changes made to the people that survived back then, maybe on purpose. That much he'd gotten from Mutta when she was talking about medical matters. That there used to be diseases for sex was interesting. No, it was just that he didn't want to taste five other guys on her breath this early in the day. Or ever.

Yeah, he was a prude. He knew it, still...

The taste was of cinnamon. His own toothpaste was the same still, though when it was gone he was switching back to the normal anise flavor.

His own body started to respond, so Tor let go of her and winked. They didn't have time for that now and she was probably tired of it anyway for the time being. Instead they went to the food area where a box of fat and nut bars had been opened. A pack of crackers in waxed paper sitting on the top left hand side. People took them but ate slowly as if it was a chore, after the first bite he could see why. The flavor was bland, but not bad, just a slight nut flavor with a very light hint of berry and shreds of chewy meat, all coated in fat. Yum. They were dried, the nuts, meat and berries, so the flavors didn't carry well in the mouth. The texture was waxy, and probably had to be, to not melt in the heat, and sickening after the first few bites. On the good side, he decided, a few bites would really do the trick for a while and they could carry them along, eating when they got hungry.

“What is this crap.” The big Baron, Havor, muttered looking at the bar in his hand, not even taking a bite.

Tor didn't bother glaring. Really, he expected less complaints from a member of the secret army. He'd have to get with Kolb on that. Maybe some kind of special training? It wasn't the Baron's fault, but if he complained, others would be more likely to as well.

“Survival rations. Eat it or starve, but we have work to do and a time limit. It's food and won't make you sick, so get some in you, and eat when you get hungry, we don't have time to whine about the food here. This is one of the biggest missions your unit has ever been on. Maybe one of the biggest anyone has ever done. So eat it, and don't think about it.” Tor's voice surprised him and made Trice sit up and look at him funny. He'd sounded enough like Kolb that several people looked around for the weapons master.

The Baron looked at the bar, grimaced and took a bite, chewing as if it were poisoned and then trying it again. It wasn't of course, Tor

had checked without even thinking of it. He always did now. Across from him Trice smirked, which was her go to look with him, he wondered if it was really a smirk or just her small smile? She seemed happy enough. She actually felt happy when Tor bumped into her field for a second.

He'd been reading that look wrong the whole time he'd known her? Oops. What else had he been just getting wrong, he wondered, staring at her a little as he tried to figure her out. Her smile went mischievous and playful, which made him instantly check her field, feeling relived when that guess actually turned out to be correct.

“Oooh, Commander Tor... ready for duty sir!” Going low her voice went happy and teasing too, “have any commands for me... sir?”

A year before Tor would have blushed, flustered and gone over how he'd misunderstood her or how she was obviously just playing with him. This time, a year older and wiser, he got it.

Finally.

“I do, in fact. Right now we have work to do, but later I want to see you in my quarters. Naked and on your knees. Understood?” That he blushed as he said it didn't come through in his voice at all, he thought, almost proud of the fact.

“Oohhh, fierce! Well then, yes sir, understood Commander Tor sir.”

They both laughed.

Chapter twelve

The rivers didn't go in without a hitch, they had two floods in places where the water just wouldn't follow the pits dug, choosing to make its own way. The water in one flattened and spread into what would probably be a swamp if they didn't fix it, but Mutta asked if they could leave that alone.

"Wetlands are excellent for water purification and holding the air temperature steady. There seems to be several streams developing on the other side so it should drain, we should wait and see what happens." Her look was oddly excited by the prospect, which Tor didn't get. If she'd wanted a swamp, she could have just asked. That wouldn't have been too hard to come up with at all.

The evenings were spent resting and planning out the next day, they didn't have wood for communal fires and didn't need them, since no one was feeling the heat or the night time chill at all. So they sat around a glow plate instead.

Mutta, trying to get to know her perspective husband, had taken to sitting right next to him and chatting about Noram life, leaving Bonita sitting alone for once, next to Ali. Tor got them to scoot a tiny bit apart so that he could sit between them and put an arm around each, hoping it wasn't too foreword. He hadn't been with Nita much lately and this was about as much contact as he'd ever had with Alissa. They both leaned into him, which he took as a good sign. Leaning away could have meant anything from "don't touch me" to "wish you'd showered first", of course he had showered already, the dust and dirt here kind of required it. It got into everything, even under his clothes and into bodily crevices that would have rubbed him raw if he hadn't cleaned up immediately after work each day.

"There you are Nita! I know I suggested that Alphonse meet you and you two get to know each other, but I also told him not to steal you away forever. He agreed, but I think under the brilliance that is you, he forgot. Not that I blame him, it's obviously all your fault, how could he help himself? I'll let it go this time, but try not to let it happen again. At least spread yourself around a bit so I don't have to worry about fighting the heir to an entire kingdom for you." He leaned back into her gently and kissed her.

"Hey! We're going to get married right? A little discretion then please." Ali said, sounding almost like she meant it.

"Sorry. You're right of course. Rude of me." Tor kissed her too, trying for a chaste peck on the lips. She grabbed his ears and didn't let go until she'd made him do what she wanted for nearly a minute. It didn't hurt, so his shield didn't turn on to protect him.

Tor felt bad about that. He didn't want to hurt her feelings, but he didn't want to break the law either. Not that kissing was covered in the law, but still, it was kind of sex adjacent in his mind. Really though, Tor realized, he didn't even know the laws about that here, he may have been breaking them already with Trice. Tor called out the question to the Ambassador across the glow plate sitting on the ground.

“What? Oh... there isn't any actual law about that... You get married when you have the funds and wherewithal to keep a man. I've heard of girls as young as twelve doing it and as old as fifty going for their first one.” The small women looked around as everyone stared.

Ursala blinked rapidly, doing calculations in her head.

“But you have to be married to have sex? And only ten percent of the population is male... then, do you have a lot of girlfriends? How does that work?”

Mutta smiled and giggled behind her hand, a Noram court gesture.

“We do without a lot. Gray changed the people of Afrak several thousand years ago to not be as sexually... driven. We mainly do that just to have children. Still, if I wrangle a Noram Prince, I'd have to change my mind set on that wouldn't I? Having sex with people. It will take getting used to.”

Ursala nodded, her face still. Tor got the idea, she'd been thinking of Rolph as hers almost her entire life and in a very real way she was right, but if she wanted to make it stick, she needed to get going soon. Bonita squeezed him and whispered in his ear.

“Too bad I couldn't get married. No one wants me though. Still, this has been nice. Everyone on this trip has been so kind to me. No jokes or games at my expense. Thank you for that. It means so much, even if I have to go back to the country estate after. I'll always remember this.” She looked sad so Tor risked Ali's wrath and kissed her cheek.

“Not unless you want to. Ali's already made plans for you to come live with us and, well, I did some checking around for you, since I can't marry you myself now, given the current plan, which I was kind of thinking of doing for a while... asking for your hand myself? Count Lairdgren likes you and he should have a wife soon. I talked to him about it and he seems to like the idea all right. You... seem to think he's funny at least, if you want I can try and get that going. Plenty of decent guys out there for you if you don't want him though. I don't get the whole thing with you thinking you aren't good enough... We could probably find a half dozen guys right here that would marry you right now if we told them you wanted to.” Who would be dumb enough to miss how great she was? Not him. Not Burks either.

They all just sat and talked that night, for hours. Tor slept alone but got up early and started working as soon as everyone got things together. Wensa and her crew had all the rivers up by day nine, and the rest of the crew had the last of the main side streams moving out into the desert for irrigation and back into the main lines to prevent flooding three days later. It took a bit longer than he'd thought, but even out of the sand and bare earth seeds had started growing along the water already, the moisture spreading in large dark fans from the glistening muddy brown rivers and rivulets. They hadn't even put any out. They were just there, waiting in the earth for enough water to sustain them.

Tor took down his little emergency house the next day and brushed his teeth after eating the tasteless fat bar he had in the bag on his hip. He wasn't the only one doing that, in fact he'd gotten the idea from Trice who suggested it to him on the third day. The cinnamon lingered in the mouth, but was better than just fat.

Finding Mutta he sighed.

"There you go. Ten full rivers even, instead of just four, and enough water to drown this vast desert if you don't monitor the situation closely. Believe that I'm not really the Court Jester yet?" He did his best to smirk at her, failed since it wasn't a look he could easily pull off and smiled winningly instead.

Spreading her hands the dark woman gave him a serious look.

"You can't be both? And to that end, are you really sure you aren't the Court Jester? You certainly spend a lot of time seeing to the amusement and comfort of others... Speaking of which great-uncle..." She fingered the amulets at her neck self consciously.

"Can I keep the magic clothing and heat equalizer?"

Since Tor hadn't thought about taking them back at all he nodded and asked if she wanted anything else. She smiled and looked down a bit shyly.

"Well, there is one thing..."

Tor just nodded when he heard it. It was a daring move on her part, but would make her proposal to Rolph a lot more real wouldn't it? Plus she'd invoked their family connection, which meant, by his rules, he was required to aid her. Not that he wouldn't have anyway.

They all moved back to the ship, finding it exactly as they left it, later that afternoon. Tor started right in on baking, the crackers and bread he'd made for the trip barely passing the first day before running out. No one showed up to help, being tired and wanting naps, hot soaks and entertainments. For that most of them that seemed to play cards. Tor found that so boring he wouldn't even bother and preferred working or talking to people instead. Mutta had come with them, the big "present" she'd asked for from him, so she could press

her case with the Queen herself. It was actually a good move Tor knew, since a woman in a foreign land would be a lot easier to ignore than one in the next room. Ursala wasn't any too pleased about it and hinted that she could have an "accident" on the way over... But only out of ear shot of his great niece.

Mutta, it turned out, had a first name too and it wasn't even Ambassador. Close though, Tor thought. It was Abbie. Actually that was a nick name for Abumanintali, but no one other than Tor could manage it without adding or dropping syllables. She asked him to call her that instead of her last name, since they were family, a point she'd made several times when asking if she could come.

Well, he could afford her upkeep easily, if it came to that, and she had all that medical skill, the Afrak were years beyond Noram in that regard, which made her valuable... Maybe centuries ahead. Even if the marriage to Rolph fell through, and Tor did tell her it was a bit of a long shot, she could practice her craft or even teach at one of the schools. The idea made her happy it seemed, she smiled at least, and suggested she could do that even when the marriage arrangements came through.

The trip back found Tor with more helpers in the kitchen, since everyone was just that bored now, and working really did beat sitting around. For him personally it meant some actual free time to practice fighting in the afternoons. It was fun in a way, though Kolb and Petra were both constantly trying to get him killed it seemed, demanding he do better each day, and not just a little. They kept putting him up against four and even five people at once, which he couldn't beat of course, as hard as he tried. He was sore and bruised all the time, but didn't complain about it. What else did he have to do for fun? Mope?

Trice started hanging around with him constantly, and so did Sara. It was nice enough, but didn't make a lot of sense really, unless it was a spying thing? But what was there to spy on here, his secret baking recipes? Tor's failures in fight practice? Still, if they wanted to hang out that was fine, they were friends, spies or not. On the fourth night they both moved into his room with him, their trunks sitting along his far wall and both lounging on his bed when he walked in after dinner. Looking at the whole thing Tor crossed his arms.

He didn't mind, but they each had their own room, they didn't even have to share...

"Relax Tor," Trice said gently, giving him a hug.

"Were just claiming you as ours, that's all. You'll thank us later. Karina was about to auction you off to the highest bidder and a few of the people stepping up were definitely not your type. I think a few just wanted to have anal sex with you as revenge for making us eat those awful fat bars." Crossing her arms the fuzzy headed bleached blond

shook her head woefully.

“Who could blame them? Those things sucked. They'd have broken you though and then no one would be able to play with you.”

Sara pushed her a little and winked in his direction.

“Oh, it wasn't that bad, Trice is exaggerating. Karina was just joking about it all anyway. We just wanted some company and to solidify our claims on you. Married or not, you're our Tor. Saw you first and all that. We'll Petra saw you first, as she mentioned earlier, but you seem to like her, so we need to work harder if we don't want to be left behind.”

What? They thought he didn't like them? Why? He asked, but neither answered him until he comically started tapping his foot, hands on hips like a farmer's wife demanding the shops oven bake faster.

“OK! I'll talk, but don't get mad?” Sara looked at him tentatively as if he really was going to get mad over something. He promised not to get too mad, and hoped he could keep his word.

It seemed that everyone thought he was being all stand-offish again.

Tor didn't visit with the crew really, or play cards, or bathe with them, except by chance and then he didn't hang out, just washed quickly and leaving. Tor also didn't make a point of spending time with any of the women overly, even his women. That made him stop Sara for a bit.

“I have women? Why doesn't anyone tell me these things. How am I supposed to know? I mean seriously, I don't think I can know things like that! I mean it may be, like a real thing, me not being able to see it. Is this serious or just casual? What am I supposed to be doing that I'm not? I mean, I understand I should spend more time with Ali, but there are others too?” He tried to think of who, but not much came. Sure, he had some friends, but...

Oh, right. They were supposed to be his girlfriends. Ah. It sounded stupid, even in his own head, but he'd forgotten that part of things. Somehow.

Sara continued without much pause.

“It's not that big a deal. It's just that you're alone a lot, so we came to make sure you aren't lonely. Is that all right? Don't worry about the rest, we're just teasing. Kind of. But... you do have some offers if you're willing. You might want to try some of them out, build alliances and make friends. People still think of you as a bit stuck-up you know. That or so discrete no one really knows what you're up to. If that's the case you might just want to shake that up a bit. You're supposed to be discrete with your partner, not the whole world.”

Trice had to tease him then, because that was who she was. He

even liked it about her, when it wasn't directed at him.

"Let us know if you need the room, or, if you want we can stay and help?" She giggled after that. As if it were just a joke?

Tor sighed and then nodded.

"Alright. But when I bring back a small hoard of women, you two have to move along quickly. Otherwise it would get all awkward, don't you think?"

Sara gave him a look that was so serious Trice busted up laughing. That got a sharp look from the blond towards her friend.

"Trice... do you really think he can't do it? Or won't?"

That got the laughter to stop for some reason.

That night was fun, wonderful really. It wasn't that they did anything much, but they talked and kissed and hugged a lot. Tor would have liked to do something with them both, but didn't know how to ask. The trick was probably just asking. They weren't exactly afraid of such things, so why should he be? Still, he put it off until he fell asleep, missing the chance completely.

As he drifted off Tor wondered what he was doing here.

It wasn't really his world, but if this wasn't who he was, then what was he? A bakers son from Two Bends? A Builder? A guy too dumb to score with two women that probably would have jumped at the chance if he'd even mentioned sex, if only because it was less boring than chatting with him for hours?

Sleep took him hard and his dreams were odd, strange and uncomfortable. Sex dreams, a few with the girls in the room with him even. Trice had climbed in next to him at some point and the stump of her left arm was over him when he woke suddenly. She didn't wake and just rolled over and cuddled in to him when he shifted, her body warm and smelling faintly of flowers, her perfume. There wasn't enough light to see, but he could feel it was her and that she was in a deep sleep, not dreaming. Holding her close for a while he thought about what the dream had meant, if anything.

It was simple enough. He'd found the new combat giant girl Dara in the bath and asked if she wanted to have sex with him, she agreed, even though the whole thing was way bolder than he would have been with a woman he didn't know, and he'd expected her to hit him for mentioning it. Then, there in the tub, as they were doing things, kissing mainly, her face melted and she turned into his friend Karen from school.

But she was dead.

They talked about that for a while, but the answer didn't make sense to him. Her father killed her? Was it a message from the dead? That was rumored to happen even to regular people, and all the building he'd done probably made it a bit more likely to happen to

him, but Tor didn't think it was the case here.

No this was his own deep mind talking to him. What it was telling him was probably complicated and troubling.

Had he loved Karen?

They'd only been friends, she'd help him train in fighting, and was nice to him, which counted for a lot, but they hadn't been that close, had they? Had he wanted to be? Honestly, on the conscious level Tor had always been more afraid that she'd beat him than anything else. He'd kept missing her lessons, and really, deserved the beatings, but she never did it. That was the nice part of working with her. She pushed him, but she didn't punish him for being lazy or late. If he had been harboring some secret crush there, it would have made sense. It certainly wasn't off-putting in the dream. He'd been more than willing to keep going when she turned out to be Karen, hadn't he?

Trice snuggled and felt him behind her, erect, which asleep or not got her to wiggle her behind into him even more. It was nice, and frustrating, at the same time. He didn't want to wake her, but it would have been really nice to not been laying there awake and wanting her while she was literally touching him.

Well, when in doubt, meditate. Tor focused on nothing and waited. It wasn't sleep, but it passed time and kept the mind sharp. Hours later he got up and made his way to the showers fuzzily, and was standing under the warm water with his eye closed, just sensing the space quietly when he felt her next to him.

Again.

Karen.

Eye's still closed he turned. He expected to find the room empty when he opened them, but she was there... not Karen, but Dara.

"Oh! Hey Tor. Didn't see you there. Um, is it OK if I shower too? I don't want to bother you, but I was just having a late night work out." She didn't wait for him to talk, taking his wave and nod as good enough at this hour of day. He stared a little the double feeling still strong. Dara noticed and made a raspberry with her tongue. She smiled though.

"Not that kind of work out. A real one, I like to go and work out at night, get a bit extra done. You can't slack off too much, because you never know when the attack is coming. I always say that at least."

Tor, subdued, nodded and went back to washing, then stood under the spray to rinse his hair, the curtain of water spread and splashed softly. He heard the girl, woman really, about twenty-five based on her looks, washing next to him. He reached out to her again mentally, wondering if he was just reliving part of the weird dream, or projecting things on to the giant woman next to him.

Nope, she was Karen. No doubt at all. Around her neck were a

bunch of his amulets, he could feel that, mostly his work, and one that wasn't at all. A disguise?

That or he was losing it.

Well, both were actually possible. He grinned and looked at her, seeking her eyes. Brown. He couldn't remember what color Karen's had been. Ali's were blue though. Davie too, he thought. The face wasn't pretty, ugly was more the case, but he searched it looking for a hint of his friend anyway.

"Um... you're staring Tor." She said softly. The woman didn't cover herself or anything she just looked back, her eyes going to his stomach, then lower.

Well, staring at a naked girl could do that, he thought, his mind still deep enough that it was an abstract thing. Now he could either act like it was a big deal or play the erection off. He chuckled.

"Early mornings. Sorry. Not exactly polite of me. Um... if you're not seeing anyone in particular, this afternoon, late, say after dinner, would you like to practice with me?" Looking down Tor tried to act like he was as awkward and shy as he used to be. Since he really did feel pretty awkward, all things considered, it worked pretty well.

"I mean weapons practice. Um, other stuff too, if you want? That's OK if you don't want to though. Um..." He tried to give her a way out, as was polite.

"I'd love too!" she looked down at him again and smiled.

"Do you want to do some of that other stuff now?" She looked around mischievously.

"Here? No... later will do fine, thank you for the offer though, right now I need to get dressed and actually get to work. The food won't make itself and people will whine if they have to wait too long. Find me after dinner?"

"Sure. Sounds fun. I always liked chasing you around with a sword Tor, you know that."

Tor made himself blush and look down, then get going on his day. He needed to get her alone and make sure he wasn't just losing it, missing his friend too much.

Tor worked the whole day, not leaving the kitchen except to eat. Well and plot out the birthday cake for Ali. Two days. It hit him that they were going to get married the day after, and he didn't even have a gift for her. What would she like? A house? Maybe her own magic carriage? A doll?

The last thought was unkind. She was very mature for her age. Probably more than he was in some ways. Tor still felt a little guilty when the topic of sex came up for instance. He really doubted she did. For instance he kind of thought she'd managed to "entertain" at least a few of the other men on the ship, legal or not. Sure, it was a technical

thing, a few weeks, but it was where the line was drawn. Then, not everyone cared about things like that, did they?

So a cake for her birthday and...

He had nothing. Not a single clue what women wanted. Flowers, but they were at sea right now. If he tried for poems she'd probably refuse to marry him, with cause too. Not a skill of his at all. He decided to go with a set of amulets. A shield, a flight rig, a weapon? Force lance and air choke. That and a house. One of the new ones like the palace. Maybe some gold to go with it, so she could purchase what she wanted?

What he really needed was some female advice, but who did he have to ask? When it came to house holding he was the only one on the ship that knew anything at all. For clothing he had Petra, but that didn't make much of a gift now, not with the device for it so easy to use. He'd have to think about it, or put it off and pretend that what he was doing was normal, and that gifts weren't expected, being at sea and all that.

The haze lasted for the rest of the day, badly enough that no one really talked to him overly. At dinner "Dara" came to see if he still wanted to practice with her, which he really did. Not just for the exercise, which he needed, but because he had a plan, sort of.

Karen had always fought with a specific style. She used bold strikes, aimed without much precision. Tor had been trained to look for the gaps in armor or a defense, and to strike into them. Davie, who had probably learned from the same teachers, if not from his sister, fought nearly identically to her.

In a way Tor was lucky he was imagining Dara to be Karen, because if it was anyone else in the world he'd have no clue how they fought at all. She and David were the only people he'd ever analyzed that closely.

They started with practice swords, no armor and not making contact.

Tor couldn't tell at first, were the blows like he thought they would be or not? They might be, but short of getting Davie out to practice with her so he could watch, it was no use guessing.

Darn.

Well, so much for that part of the plan, he thought a bit bitterly.

After a few minutes Tor stumbled and she checked him with a shoulder, which took him off his feet so easily it was almost laughable.

"Get up! Don't just lay there. You have to be ready for that, you lack the size to not be ready for-"

Tor had already rolled under where her blade went and came up stabbing toward her midsection then heart. It was Karen. She used to love to use that move on him then berate Tor for not getting up fast

enough. They kept going, but he was sure now. Interesting. Exciting.

Karen wasn't dead?

How? Why? After about an hour of work, trying not to give everything away, he walked with her to his room, bodies coated with sweat, but it was clean and fresh, the deck not collecting dust or dirt on the ocean. At the room Sara and Trice worked at little projects, Trice had vials of glass with her, poisons or possibly scents, or a combination of both, the glass was clear and stopped with cork and the little case she had open on the table had about forty places for them, but a third stood empty.

Sara worked on a beading project, it was complex and good, a bag of some kind? He couldn't tell. She always did bead work, but he never saw her with any. They both looked up when they walked in.

"Um, not to interrupt, but you said if I needed the room?" He tilted his head.

They both scurried to put their things away, and he didn't hurry them, not really knowing what he should do next anyway. Get close to her so he could feel her field? It seemed like a plan to him. He'd already invited her for that anyway, the getting close part. How did he do that though? Sex was fun, but Karen and he had never had that kind of relationship, and even if they had, Dara and he hadn't.

It's what she'd come for though. Besides, the idea of getting her to have sex with him felt a bit naughty. Especially since "Dara" didn't really know him very well. The idea that she might actually be willing too was strange to him, but really flattering too.

As soon as the door shut Tor gestured to the bed.

"Here, lie down on your stomach-" Before he got the words out she had her clothes off and dove flat on the bed. The move could have been playful or even sexy but it seemed slightly panicked instead. Frightened suddenly.

"Um. I... was going to give you a back rub first, since we don't know each other that well, is that OK?" He made his voice soft and friendly hoping it was the right thing to do, she seemed really nervous, more than Bonita had been the first time even.

Small tremors played under his hands as he touched her. Soft and gentle, but her skin tried to move away from his hands. Like he was revolting to her. He almost stopped, but reminded himself he was actually doing something here, popular with the girl or not, so started a simple pattern of movement and found the fields around her neck with his mind, separating them as he ran his hand gently down her back. The good news was that she was excited and wanted him to keep touching her. The bad news was that the idea also terrified her and made her think of unbearable pain.

It was clearly Karen.

Her breath came faster, turned on, wet, and still desperately dreading the whole thing. Gods. What the hell had been done to her? Worse things than he wanted to know, Tor was sure. The amulet for the disguise was elegant, very much so, probably a Maris work, which meant expensive. She only did work for specific clients, normally beauty and healing devices. The field was delicate, intricate and fresh. If this device was over a year old Tor would have to find Maris and take lessons from her, because it felt very sharp still. Clean. There was no way Karen could have ever gotten the money for something like this. Tor could, in a few days worth of work, but it would cost about the same as two days of the King's week festival had for him. Forty thousand gold?

Working down her body he noticed something odd, when he got to her behind her tension decreased. Tor had expected panic as he ran his hands over her, but it just didn't come at all. She relaxed a lot and when he let his hand brush the soft curls between her lean thighs she positively melted. She'd been worried that Tor would reject her then? Why?

Her body was good, lighter than as Karen, in both color and build, her skin even, except a few moles, which were fake, he found. It was an excellent piece of work. Brilliant in fact.

Tor could smell the heat rising from her, how aroused she gotten from a few tentative brushes. She looked back over his shoulder and smiled, still looking uncertain.

"Um... which hole do you want?"

The question wasn't anything he'd been ready for.

Girls could do that, Ursala had said so. Tor just couldn't imagine them wanting their other hole used, or a woman being that blunt about it for that matter. Of course being willing was different than wanting it. Tor kissed her lower back, stalling for time. How did you answer that? He decided not to and asked her to get on all fours, entering her from behind, in the proper fashion, without warning. She seemed happy enough about it, enthused even, now that they were into the act itself. She had to lean her upper body down and he needed to kneel on a thick pillow, a beige one from the top of the bed, to make things line up right, but once that was done she tightened almost instantly, her body responding after only a few gentle thrusts.

Tor wasn't ready yet, so carefully kept going, only to find her reaching her own peak again and again as he did. Finally, looking for an excuse to touch her close to the neck he reached up and grabbed her hair with his right hand, feeling it splay between his fingers, pulling her head back. She gasped, at first he thought that it was in pain, but he felt her tighten on him so powerfully he had to stop moving or risk injuring himself. During that moment he focused his

intent and turned off the disguise.

Instantly her skin darkened, about half way between Rolph and Petra in tone, about like her brothers or Ali really. Her hair was the same, but slightly lighter, a soft brown instead of the darker color. Her face was large and a little rugged for a woman, but when she looked back he recognized the eyes. The color a blue green with a tiny bit of gray. He started thrusting again, then after a bit asked her to roll over so he could look at her. Every minute or so she was wracked with intense spasms of pleasure, Tor knew he wasn't doing anything special, so it had to be her. Something in her make-up? But if sex was always like this for her, why did she dread it and want it at the same time? Well the wanting part made sense, but the rest...

Reentering her again, the slick moistness of her hugging him, he kissed her gently, then kissed her breasts one at a time, the nipples tightened with pleasure and excitement, her lips more red than he remembered them, she chewed the lower one lightly, sweat covering her brow slightly, even though the cabin wasn't warm.

When he let himself go she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him gently.

"I love you." Her words sounded young and gentle. After a few moments her eyes popped open in horror at what she'd just said.

"Don't worry Karen, I love you too. I can't marry you or anything, and that love is more of a friendship thing, but you're definitely fun in bed. We should do it again sometime."

She nodded and then her hand went to her neck quickly.

"Crud."

"Well, it could be worse. I'd already figured it out before, if it had turned off in the middle of that and I didn't have a clue, I probably would have freaked. I thought you were dead. Can you... Tell me why and... how? I think we can milk the sex excuse for another hour, but I have to get to bed soon anyway... Work in the morning, you understand. So hurry if it's possible?"

She nodded. Took a deep breath and dove in.

"Davie and I faked my death. We knew the wine had been poisoned, we had the detectors you'd given us at school, and used them on everything. After you got poisoned for not doing that, it only made sense, didn't it? The idea was that I'd wait and train and then sneak back when everyone had an alibi and kill the beast. Um... the Count... my father. I know, it's totally illegal to do. That's why I couldn't afford to hire it done. The guild would have handled it, but they wanted nearly nine thousand gold for it, a sitting Count isn't an easy target. It's dangerous and if anyone suspects, a lot of innocent people can die in the mess. So it had to be me. My older sister..." Karen took a deep wracking breath but didn't sob or cry.

“What happened with me there, in bed just now? He... conditioned us all to be like that. Mom too I think, but I've never been certain of that. He never forced her to watch or us to watch with her. But I got away, kind of. Got lucky and was made a Knight. He may be my father, but a Knight serves the Kingdom. He couldn't touch me then. Heidi is better looking though, so he wasn't going to miss out on using her. No one could help us, so... all this.” The gesture took in her naked form and spread as if trying to include everything.

It wouldn't have worked but she happened to be near where Maris lived when her body had supposedly gone into the waterfall. Davie had drunk a tiny bit of the poison, making himself sick and weak, but not enough to kill him. That was the hope at least. But he managed to fly away, desperately seeking “help” for her. In the female builder Glyn Maris, she found a better ally than Karen could have ever hoped. Literally just showing up on her doorstep to beg aid for the day.

“She didn't just help me a little, she gave me this amulet, for free, it took her months to make it, and she hid me away the whole time, since I was supposed to be dead anyway. I had to starve weight off and exercise more to keep it that way. I told her why I needed a disguise, but she gave it to me anyway. Dad... He raped her once. He's used his position to do that to a lot of women. When it's over no one can say much. It's like with Rodriguez? How you couldn't kill him because he was a Count, so you used those devices to make him give up? Only nothing would make dad give up. He's a monster, you have to believe me. I... I know that you're friends with the royal family and have to turn me in, but... but... I made them help me. Maris and Davie... It was all me. I... forced them too, I... I threatened them into it... They weren't really a part of it. They shouldn't be held to blame.” Her voice had grown increasingly panicked as she realized what could potentially go wrong.

Tor shook his head.

“Screw that, I paid ten thousand gold to have the man killed, if we want to start pointing fingers I don't think they actually move all the way over to you if he shows up dead now.”

“You what? Really? Why? Not that there aren't a thousand good reasons, probably one for each coin you spent, but it's dangerous to take on a Count like that.” Karen did not sound displeased. Happy was closer really.

Why had he? The answer was simple enough.

“Because no one else really could. He hurt people, hurt my friends. I can't make him pay for that, not really, but I can stop him now that I know. Look, I don't know if anything will even happen, so you have to keep being Dara, and I have to marry Ali, your sister

Gretchen? So that he can't get at her. I can't protect the boys, but David is his own man now, and Jerral has an apprenticeship with Kolb lined up, which will get him away from home at least. It's the best I could come up with so far."

"Ali is Gretchen? I didn't know, she looks so different! And you're getting married? When, is she even old enough? I... Aue twelve... Tomorrow? Today now? She's an adult under the law. Not free of him, but able to marry. But you need his permission... or... how?" She seemed worried suddenly, confused.

But oddly hopeful.

That was simple, he told her, his fingers gently stroking her back again, a sudden thrill of fear and desire in her. Gods. That bastard had conditioned her to both desperately want and fear sex? Why? What kind of sicko did that? The kind that had total power in his own little word, obviously. A lot of people didn't do very well with power did they?

"I got permission from the King himself, acting as her father. If Count Derring shows up before it's consummated, he can take her, but after that she becomes my responsibility. If he tries to touch her then I can take her away, or even fight for her. Every man has that right, even against a Count and his army. Only, you know, most people can't fight an army. I cheat."

Magic.

The Count may be able to beat him in a real fight, man to man, or bring an army to bear, but with magic Tor could best him. Maybe at least. It was a risk, but Tor would do it if forced.

After a few moments he asked her what she wanted to do, meaning a plan or something, how he should act around Dara that kind of thing. She smiled happily and pushed him back, her mouth finding him hungrily, eagerly. Tor was just about to finish when the girls came back just walking in, not making a noise. Trying to catch him and Dara? Well, oops. Karen didn't stop, or even look up until he was totally done, then she started licking him clean, her attention riveted on Tor alone, oblivious to the two new comers standing and staring at her.

At Karen.

"I... see." Trice said after a moment, nodding and making sure the door was locked.

Sara just blinked at them, looking a tiny bit jealous for some reason. Maybe she wanted Karen for herself? Well, or him, but she kind of already had that, so it didn't really make sense.

Tor explained quickly and swore both girls to secrecy, for now at least. The King and Queen would know, Burks would know, these two and him. Davie knew she lived, but not that she was Dara. OK. That

was fine as long as they didn't drag things out for years. Everyone could keep a secret that long though, couldn't they? The weakest link here was probably him. Tor the bumpkin. All this intrigue stuff and lying was new to him after all.

They all talked most of the night, meaning he had to leave early to start on Ali's cake. Apple spice, with a butter cream frosting and a light dusting of crushed almonds. It was what they had the ingredients for, though he was using dried apples chopped almost into powder. At dinner everyone clapped and called Ali out, let her have some cake, and then proceeded to do lewd things to her that would have been illegal the day before in Noram. Like half of them hadn't done the same things already.

They stopped short of getting really naughty, and apparently no noble girl was really expected to make it to fourteen as a virgin, but it was the tradition to pretend anyway. What could they do? Tradition was tradition after all. Finally she settled on his lap and asked for her present. Tor was thankful that he'd packaged something up for her, things that got applause even though out of everything only the house was really hard to get yet. At least for this crowd.

Smiling she leaned in and kissed him.

"That's not what I meant." Her hand reached between his legs to the laughter of the room, making him blush. That and squirm a little.

Oh.

Oh.

She was legal, so it wasn't a problem there and so completely not a virgin that it wouldn't hurt anything, but he felt like they should wait for their wedding night. Then again he'd done that twice and it hadn't worked for him at all, had it? Could they split the difference somehow?

Petra had an answer for him.

"Sure. We won't dock until tomorrow afternoon, not really docking at all. Wait two hours for midnight, have the wedding here and the King's orders will be fulfilled. Consummate and everything will be jolly." She kept her words low.

Honestly, Tor hadn't been aware that she knew that much about why they were getting married, but apparently either as ship's Captain, member of the secret army or just his girlfriend, she'd picked up that this wasn't just a casual thing.

At sea, the Captain could marry people legally. Everyone knew this, except him, which made Tor duck his head, slightly ashamed. Right, it was in the stories of nobles and merchants, but not bumpkins.

They had two hours in which to decorate and pick clothing. And of course, now that a marriage was going to happen, Tor wasn't allowed to see her, it was bad luck. Petra his go-to clothing person,

was helping the bride, so he got Karina and Rolph instead. They'd worn clothes almost their whole lives, they assured him, so it wouldn't be a problem. He ended up in black velvet with tight white stockings under loose pants and a fine jacket that hugged the waist, for color he had a brilliant red sash that ran from left shoulder to right hip.

Rolph looked at him and shook his head.

"It will have to do, can't change the face at this late date."

Karina punched her brother on the arm hard enough to activate his shield.

"Don't you dare tease him now, besides, you know full well that if we sent him out on the streets of the Capital looking like this we'd never see him again. Some Countess, or Princess, would kidnap him and he'd be whisked off the country. I'm not at all sure it would be me getting there first either. It would be a race." She sighed.

"My lovely Tor." She petted his arm lightly and looked at him wistfully, but didn't kiss him or even move in to hug.

The ceremony was short, but attended by a group of splendidly clad combat giants and ten Royal Guards dressed in full livery, stiff black and purple, standing on either side of the top deck spectators behind with the Prince and Princess as the first maid and best man. Petra had jotted down the words quickly, but they resonated with him. Powerfully.

"To protect, to honor, to love." She said calmly, but loudly, the rest of the people behind them repeating the words when she said them. It was an impressive effect, something to remember if he was ever designing such a ceremony, that group chanting thing. Tor glanced at Alissa, trying to keep the nervousness off his face as she was asked if she took him as her husband.

She said yes. A simple word, but when he was asked Tor thought his voice might catch or crack and betray him. Somehow it came out strong and clear.

"Yes." Maybe too loud? No one laughed at him.

"Then so be it, you are for now, and always, man and wife."

No one had to tell them to kiss.

That was in all the stories, even in Two Bends, and everyone did it. Somehow, magically, bafflingly, he'd done it. He was married. It hit him all at once, but he wasn't going to let it show now, it was done. Except for the consummation.

Normally no one would question the word of a man or woman that said they'd had sex and that the marriage was real, but this wasn't a normal situation at all was it? They kind of needed to be able to prove the deed had been done, and well enough that a child could result. It wouldn't, but that wasn't the law, they just had to do it.

Karina held Ali's hand tightly, Showing support. He'd married her

as Gretchen Derring, so that it would really Count, and there could be no possible loophole. Tor led her to a bed that was set up for the purpose of making sure there were unimpeachable witnesses to the whole thing.

Whee.

No pressure or anything.

Well at least his mother wasn't there to watch. That would have made it about impossible, as it was he had to spend a lot of time on foreplay so that it wouldn't hurt her, no one had thought to bring lubricant and while she could have handled it anyway if he was quick about the whole thing, she assured him, his wife didn't have to risk pain for him.

Ever.

It lacked the sweetness he'd have liked for her, too many eyes for that, but he did everything he could, and used every trick he knew to help her relax. She didn't really, but her soft cries and finally after nearly an hour, his own, satisfied everyone watching. Then there was normally dancing, games and all that, but unless Ali wanted a post-nuptial sword fight, they didn't have a lot of games at hand and music had been totally forgotten in their hurry to get out of Noram.

She held his hand and whispered softly in his ear after the clothing was arranged and the bed put away.

"I love you."

"I love you too. Forever and for always."

It was a lie, of course.

She was too young and too new to him for real love, but if he had to lie for her to feel safe, he'd make her think he loved her, no matter what. He'd make himself love her. For all the horrors she'd gone through, she remained sweet and innocent, or at least she could still act that way, which was probably good enough. How much could you ask of a person anyway?

He swept her into his arms and danced with her in front of everyone, someone started humming a song he thought he remembered from school, but couldn't place. Then almost everyone joined in. After a bit he recognized it, the Lairdgren school anthem "Oh, be my heart so green". It had never made any sense to him, but now he thought he kind of got it, knowing a bit more about Burks. It wasn't about loving the school's colors beyond all reason, but the world.

It was a pledge to protect it. No matter what.

Oh. That made sense then, didn't it?

They laughed and played, holding hands while walking around so he could introduce everyone present to Mrs. Baker, a fact which they already knew was a reality first hand, a thought that made him blush,

but no one teased him or Ali about it. Dara had broken down crying, and moved off to the side after giving his wife a hug. She smiled through the tears a kerchief in hand.

"May you be safe forever." She said softly, as they walked away.

At nearly two he had to go to bed, having been up for a day already, longer than that. He also had to be up in a few hours again. Still, it was worth it, he told himself. They'd done it. Ali really was safe now. At least from her father. The rest was up to him.

They slept in the same bed and he kissed her cheek when he forced himself up to go and cook for the day. She roused and looked at him blearily.

"Hmmm. Do you want to have sex? Or I could use my mouth? Let's do that. I'm pretty good at it." Her voice was exhausted so he chuckled and put her back to sleep, reminding her that they had forever now.

"I love you husband." She murmured, so innocent and sweet he nearly lost it and cried.

"I love you little wife."

That got Tor thinking. She'd be little until she got her full growth going, then she'd probably be as tall as Karen, six-six, or more. Well, that would still work in bed and if it looked funny walking together he'd work out some way to make it look better, that was all.

Maybe blinding anyone that laughed about seeing it? That would work. Tor nodded, since he knew he could make a device for it.

The morning was normal until about seven when a still tired looking Alissa walked into the kitchen and started trying to help. She explained it with a yawn. His work was hers now, right? Plus, it wasn't like she could help out with the building work, so cooking it was.

Tor smiled and set her to whisking the eggs he'd cracked already, keeping an eye on her while she tried to make scrambled for seventy-three. The big focus stone bowl nearly slipped twice, but she kept her hold on it and then tried to fix the eggs in the bowl by sitting it on the griddle top, Tor nearly panicked but then smiled and added some oil to the mix. As long as she stirred from the bottom regularly it would work. The pans were all made of the same stuff after all. He showed her how to fold them over pulling the already cooked egg from near the heat. It actually seemed to work pretty well. She needed help putting them into the big covered serving tray, and getting that to the other room, not used to carrying heavy, hot things, or possibly just wanting Tor to help her, because they were married. Either way he smiled at her.

She didn't want to leave him she said, but hadn't showered yet, and since they had plans later...

He almost drew a blank on that. Oh, plans, he got it then. Before lunch he decided. He kept having a feeling that something was going to go horribly wrong when they got to Printer. But if it did, whatever they faced, whoever it was, they'd be in for a fight if it came to it. Count or not, that bastard Derring was not going to get his bride. Not even if Tor had to rip his own field apart to stop it from happening.

Everyone else thought so too, it seemed to Tor, Kolb flying from the ship to scout things out himself first, three of his people checking in all directions. They touched down lightly on the deck over the course of ten minutes and said it was all clear.

It really was. There wasn't anyone to meet them at all. Not from the palace at least. The towns people met them in good force, and cheered when Tor introduced his new wife. For some reason they all seemed happy enough to see them all, but especially Tor. After a while he understood what the deal was, they remembered him from the big storm and apparently that meant a good bit more to them right now than more trivial things like two members of the royal family standing there beside him. All the attention for his friend just got a huge grin from Rolph though.

He was cool that way.

"See, and here you thought people didn't like you."

Holly Printer walked out of her big house with a smile and a hug for him and one for his bride, offering them the comfort of her home for as long as they wanted. The words weren't just formal either, Tor could tell she really meant it, which was touching. He almost said yes, but Ali spoke first, a small smile on her face.

"Thank you Countess Printer, your offer is most generous. We have our own home with us, would it be impolite to use that? Privacy... you know." Ali sounded so correct suddenly that Tor nearly clapped his hands. A very proper wife indeed. Now if only he could manage half as well.

The Countess smiled and gave the girl another hug.

"Anything you want. Either of you, seriously. If we have it, or can get it for you, it's yours for the asking." Turning to the short builder she grimaced a little and let out a gust of air.

"Tor... Alissa, would you please excuse me for a moment? I fear my position requires me to impart some bad news to one of your ship's crew. I hate this part of the job, I really do." Her eyes took on a dark tone, somber and regal at the same time.

She didn't hesitate though, hating the duty or not, walking straight to David Derring and speaking softly for a few seconds, her right hand on his upper arm gently. After a bit he said something to her, and then broke out into a grin. Then he half tackled the Countess in a hug, swinging her around happily.

“Whooooo! That fucking bastard is dead! I'm finally free! Gretchen! We're safe, we're free! It's true, the official call to mourning has gone out already! Dad's dead!” He didn't dance around, but he pumped his fist with glee and Ali clapped rapidly.

From across the winding path Dara ran over and started celebrating with them, picking Ali up in a hug and swinging her around, then grabbing Davie and pounding him on the back hard. After a few minutes David gave her a slightly funny look. It had a smile at first, still happy, but faded to something more somber after a moment.

“I'm glad that you're happy too, and trust me, if you're ever going to be pleased over any death, this is the one to celebrate, but... did you know him? He... didn't harm you or yours, did he?” His jaw clenched and the words tightened when he asked. It was all too possible that his father had done horrible things to her. It showed on his face.

She dropped the disguise and the giant boy whooped again.

“Karen! You were with us all this time? Thank god, I was so worried he'd gotten you! Oh, gods... I have both of you back.”

If there were tears then, no one bothered to notice them overly.

That led to a retelling of the whole tale, for everyone that wanted to listen, their friends, Countess Printer and even the towns people. None of them hide anything of note or left things out. Tor cried and celebrated the man's death himself then, even with the reek of death filling his nose and hearing a whisper of the dead man's voice in his ears. Accusing him angrily.

It was worth it.

Completely and totally.

Tor hugged his new family in their “grief” and helped them plan what to do next.

Chapter thirteen

The capital was much as he left it, Tor noted, no new attacks or Major remodeling when he was gone. They'd even left the purple glowing river along the top of the city wall for some reason. People could, Tor supposed, use it for water, if they could reach it, but really it was too high to be anything but a decoration for most people. He could rig water pumps to carry the fresh water to cisterns for people if he got a chance. Fresh water never really hurt as long as nothing flooded.

If they were clever about it they could shunt the water off and use it for massive growing projects...

His house was smaller, now that it didn't have to hold four hundred and sixty odd extra people, the Wards having returned home nearly a month before, the day after the rest of them went off to Printer. The events had all been taken down, even the waterfall mountain, which was a shame, since it really broke up the otherwise empty skyline. Tor thought so at least. What did he know though? The wide open sky was pretty too, but a little plain, dressed only in its blue or gray.

Petra didn't go with everyone else from Kolb's group when they left for Wilderness Station, getting permission to stay with him, to help work on his fighting skills. Since he still wasn't working on anything building wise yet she'd decided to take advantage of it and push him to a new level.

By killing him over and over again apparently. She followed the old pattern, him running a lot farther than he wanted too, followed by lifting heavy stones until he couldn't lift even the little ten pound ones. Then, she, Karen and Davie would take turns beating him, or at times, they'd go after him all at once. Even with all that, paying more attention now and actually trying to improve, rather than letting the others beat him into it like at school, Tor slowly got better. That or the others were being nice to him for some reason. It was possible he knew.

Karen didn't tell anyone that he'd had her father killed, he'd checked with her just to make sure, but the man suddenly dying like he had earned some attention. Even the King raised an eyebrow when they talked about how coincidental it was. Tor had a problem with the man and left for a month, then, like magic, the man suddenly died... Tor shrugged, something far too casual for a King to see, but so automatic he couldn't help it really.

"People do pass away like that though. He was flying and crashed. No one saw it, but I've told people for a long time that you

need to both have a shield and use it if you want to be safe. It's a little odd, but people can mess up. I've done it myself a few times, hitting my shield to turn it on, but really turning it off instead. It's one of the reasons for the new shields I made."

It wasn't lying if Richard never asked, was it? And the monarch was so very careful not to. Maybe it didn't occur to him, since Tor and three of the man's own children had been either in Afrak or coming and going. Everyone agreed that they couldn't have done anything from there, could they? Rich really seemed suspicious though. Like he knew something.

Maybe he did. After all, his own spy, Trice, had set the whole thing up. She might have simply reported it. If so, then the King was backing his play, at least in private. If not Tor couldn't tell him, or the man would have to take action.

It was a law after all.

The chair Tor sat in was soft enough, and had nice wood working on the arms, smooth and hard. That was a good thing, because the Queen was asking him about his marriage pointedly. Her words a bit sharper than normal. It gave him something to grab on to while he tried to not react outwardly.

"So, now that the girls safe and sound, when will you be getting an annulment? Even if you consummated it so publicly the King can still end it for you, especially since you were responding to a known and intractable threat. You had to do it, of course, but now, well... No one expects you to stay married in a case like this." Her tone implied that Tor had better be planning to dump the girl, or else they were going to have problems.

They were going to have problems then. He took a breath.

"Ali's going to Lairdgren next month and I decided to go back myself. I'll take lessons during the day and do my building work in the evenings and on break days. The enrollment should be going back up with the scholarships and hopefully, if we can get the proper letters to the Denno Brown, the Austrans will give up on killing me personally. Then we just need to figure out why they're at war with us at all and see if we can't smooth that over. That or destroy them well enough they don't come back for a few generations."

Connie stared at him with real anger in her eyes. Rage, her breath coming in short pants, the King blinked at her.

"Dear? Are you all right?" He asked calmly.

She started shaking a little, her hands mostly, anger running through her, growing with each passing moment.

"Damn him," Her breath caught half way through the him. "Damn him to the void!"

Him who, Tor wondered. Him Tor? What had he done? Help a

girl not have horrible things happen. Check. Got lawfully married, also taken care of. Going back to school? Tor probably didn't really have to. He was making gold, more than he could spend, but that was why he needed to go back, to figure out economics and all the other thousands of things he just didn't understand yet and probably wasn't smart enough to ask. A class on social behavior in noble society would be good for instance. If there even was such a thing. If not, he'd need private tutoring from someone that would actually explain things clearly.

Connie wasn't done though, so he didn't speak.

"No, I won't let him do this... and we can't stop him." She sighed loudly, tears forming in her pretty eyes. She stared at Tor and shook her head.

"The marriage is over and that's final. We'll have a meeting tonight, here at seven. I'll see the proper people are informed. Bring your wife Tor, this needs to be done in the open, not behind closed doors." Then as if she hadn't left the whole thing hanging she stopped speaking.

"Um, I... don't get it. I'm married, as far as I know there's nothing wrong with that. Is this, I don't know anything in particular? I guess I could use some information."

"Don't worry Tor, we'll protect you." She said. The King nodded then as if finally getting something.

From what? Marriage? OK, So Ali wasn't who he would have chosen for himself, but she was a fine wife and was trying really hard to learn skills that no one had ever bothered to even show her before. She certainly didn't need for Tor to compound the problems she'd had for as long as she could remember by disappearing now or letting anyone make their marriage not real. What the hell was this about?

No one would tell him, just asking him back at seven.

Great, so now he had four hours to go back and tell his new wife that they might not be married the next day, and oh, by the way, no one will tell us why. The other option was to let her walk into it without knowing, but that wouldn't go well at all. A slow anger burned in his gut, it wanted to rip out, to tear the world in half, but he controlled it, damped it down, focused his will and flew back after Not-flying to the south gate.

He found Nita and Ali sitting on the front porch in a screened room that made it hard to see them from the outside, but fairly easy for them to see out, he had to go in and walk back to reach them, through a doorway in the front wall that hadn't been there earlier. The cold marble floor felt harder than normal for some reason. That or his feet were heavier. Maybe it was just his soul weighing him down. How was he supposed to tell her this? When he stopped in front of her

he looked her in the eye and told her what was said and his own reaction, then waited.

She just nodded.

"Oh... Well, Karen and David said that would probably happen, or something like it. You're too important to be married to someone like me. I hope we can still be friends though and maybe sleep together? Your very good at it. Do I still get to go to school do you think? I'll have to ask Heidi, but she may not want to pay for it. She didn't go to school, dad kept her at home. She may want that for me too. I don't know."

Tor hugged her. Why was she taking this all so calmly? Tor wasn't. In fact he was half considering showing up armed to the teeth and carrying several weapons just in case. That wouldn't help though. No one was trying to steal her away, just say they weren't married.

But they were! You couldn't just make that go away with the waive of a royal hand could you?

Connie seemed to think so.

Tor didn't.

The conflict there was obvious, but what could he really do? He was a Knight and subject of Noram and if the King said jump, he had to. But until it was ordered, Tor could argue the point with the best of them.

Was it Connie? Why wouldn't she want him married? Even if the Queen secretly wanted him to be her lover or something like that, and even to Tor that she did wasn't that big of a secret, by the rules of their society, her station in it at least, that was fine. Expected even. Was it them going away? Tor planned to be in town every few weeks to check on Debbie and her store anyway and there were festivals and birthdays. It just didn't make sense that way. If anything he'd probably see her more now than before. Being married he'd have an excuse to slow down with all these other women too, which was a bit of a relief.

Oh, the sex was wonderful. That part was grand really. The attention was good too, who didn't like attention? But it felt like he needed to slow down now and pay most of his to Ali. It was only right. Still, Alissa wouldn't care if he met with Connie a few times a month. He might feel guilty about it, but it was tempting. The Queen was about the prettiest woman Tor knew and had always been nice to him personally. Before this at least. The whole married to the King thing was off putting to his bumpkin mind set, but he'd adapt.

So it couldn't be that, right?

What else was there though? Had Burks demanded it be ended? That... made even less sense to Tor. Why would the man bother with that at all, unless he had some other marriage in mind for him? But then why tell him to marry Ali to protect her from the evil Count?

That sounded like some kind of story book tale, the kind his sisters always liked. Some man, normally good looking and dashing, sweeping in and rescue the beautiful Princess from her evil father, who was actually a monster.

Close enough. He couldn't match the looks, but the dad was worse than he'd ever heard mentioned in any of those stories. By so much Tor couldn't bring himself to think about the specifics.

They got ready in silence, Ali not scared or worried at all, just a little sad. Before they left she pulled him onto the bed and kissed him, then snuggled her head, light brown hair back in a complicated twist, onto his chest.

"I... no matter what happens I want you to know that I won't forget what you did for me Tor. You saved me when no one else could even try. The King and Queen themselves didn't have the power to help me, and you stood for me anyway. For all of us. I know that you'd stay with me still, which means so much." Her face looked miserable for a moment but then she forces a rueful smile.

"Still, I claim right of place and am bumping all the other women as your mistress. I mean you can keep them too, I just get to be the most important one now. That seems only fair." She nodded firmly and stood up, offering him her hand. Because man and wife helped each other and they were that, for now.

Tor made sure she had a shield on and that it was working before they left. Then gave her a second one to hide under her clothes just in case the first was taken somehow. She did it but didn't think it would ever be needed.

"It's the palace, that's got to be one of the safest places in the world." She said innocently.

"You'd think. People have tried to kill me there, two... no three times now. Shields are your friend. I'd go in armed to the teeth too, but I'm afraid I'd use a weapon if I had it. I'm so angry about this..."

At the front gate they were met by the Prince and both princesses, who had apparently been standing by and just waiting for them to arrive. That was telling and a bit ominous Tor decided.

"Tor, Ali, welcome." Rolph didn't seem happy to see them, and Varley wouldn't even make eye contact. Karina at least took the girls hand, but avoided him as well. Had he done something wrong? It wasn't reflecting on his wife at least, thank god. That would be too much to bear, if somehow being with him had stained her.

A horrible thought came to him then, as Karina started leading Ali away by the hand. Had they found out that he'd had Derring killed? The very thought made the dead smell come back, but Tor didn't let his reaction to the possibility show, even if he wanted to retch at the moment.

“Well,” Tor said, walking beside Rolph, his friend not looking at him.

“Any clue as to what I'm facing in there? I didn't come armed, should I have?” He made his voice playful, it was also his way of letting the Royal Guards know that they didn't have to come in force to get him. He functionally couldn't fight them, unless they wanted to punch it out and in that case it would just be them beating him most likely. All of them were better at it and bigger than he was.

“No... it's, I'm not allowed to say, but I can assure you that nothing you or Ali did caused this. You just have to pay for it. But no, this isn't the time to fight, not physically. Get your words and mind ready though. I'll try to help, but may not be allowed to.” The tone was as serious as he'd ever heard from the giant red-head. Not dark, but there was nothing light left in it at all either.

Tor let his mind calm and focused as they moved, his attention moving inward as much as possible while still walking, concentration becoming sharper with each step, until he was truly in an altered state when they got into the dining room. One of those “eat dinner first, then fight” meetings that they liked so much.

He moved to take Alissa's arm and smiled at her sadly. He was so stupid and bad at life he couldn't even keep a gentle and sweet wife for a week? If they took her from him... Tor decided not to marry again. Not while Ali still lived at least. They could make him be alone, but they couldn't make him marry against his will. Not now that he was an adult. Even the King couldn't do that.

The “appropriate” people for this turned out to be Smythe, Burks, the royal family and the Dowager Countess Derring. Ali ran to her, forgetting decorum all together. Tor smiled though, they hadn't seen each other in years, so it made sense she'd want to see her immediately. Connie looked at him briefly, shook her head and looked away, as if he was supposed to understand that? Her eyes were red from crying, so whatever had been going on it wasn't a good thing.

Tor didn't bow to anyone, but when Ali, Gretchen he supposed it was now that she didn't have to hide any more, came running back. She bowed, as was normal and appropriate, Tor couldn't see the point at the moment. The only thing stopping him from yelling at people was that he wasn't sure who to fight with yet. He barely heard the pleasantries, keeping his mind deep and sharp as he could.

There was food, but it was just food. All his attention was on the people. Richard looked at him, but he didn't let his gaze linger, as if guilty, but trying not to be. Connie misted up looking at him several times and Karina looked pissed. She didn't glare at anyone in particular though, not even him, so she was mad at a situation that couldn't be helped or someone out of the room? Rolph looked at him

and sighed a lot, making grim faces. Varley looked down at her plate the whole time, not even lifting her eyes while standing.

Burks focused on him with nearly the same attention Tor was putting on everyone else though. That made sense. As had been pointed out, they were basically the same person and that person was different on a basic level compared from everyone else. The only ones even close were the other ancients. Tor didn't fool himself into thinking that an eighteen year old him was the equal of a three thousand year old one though.

That would have just been stupid. Worse than he normally was. Both he and Burks tilted their heads to the right when they looked at each other, but neither smiled over it. Next to him Countess Derring seemed... happy. Content.

The first, and only, time they'd met before she'd seemed strained and a little worn. Now Tor had an inkling why. Her hair was a short and sandy blond, frame huge for a woman, nearly six-ten or so at least and well muscled, her face a little plain, but the whole package looked nice, like she was a kind person that wanted to be that way, one fresh out of a bad circumstance.

After the strawberries, liberally sugared and served with heavy sweetened cream were finished and the table cleared, The King stood and gestured to Burks, a small movement of the hand that looked slightly reluctant. The Count moved to a small table off to one side, messed with five small black boxes on it and got three of the green garbed male servers to help him move it to the far end of the table, about fifteen feet away from Tor. When it was all done, hand hovering over a small central box, the only one without a glass lens poking from the front, shining slightly. He looked at the King.

“Ready?”

Richard looked around and sighed.

“Go.”

The instant the button was depressed two men appeared in the room. If it wasn't for the fact that all of them were now used to things suddenly appearing, thanks to the new houses, boats and carriages, people probably would have panicked. As it was everyone just assumed, correctly Tor noted after feeling the pattern of the men, that no one was really there. He could feel the effect, how the devices in the back put out intense light that bounced around to draw the pictures of men in the air. The room started to cool and Dowager Derring suddenly seemed cold. Everyone else had a temperature equalizer, but the device stole heat from the room to power it. Poorly designed in all, Tor thought. Burning energy like that. It wasn't even a solid field, just a seeming. Sloppy.

The man on the right was tall, not royal tall, but a good six-two

or three. He had on a funny three cornered hat in blue, trimmed with red and a highly over decorated jacket with similar colors and dozens of points of shine. There were also ribbons on his chest as well as gold colored shoulder patches that looked a bit too much like someone had dumped scrambled eggs on the man to take seriously. The pants were a lighter blue with a brighter red stripe down the outside of each leg.

His face was pretty average, lighter than most people in Noram, but darker than Tor by several shades. It was a bit long and a little horsey, but didn't seem bad over all, except for the eyes. The eyes weren't sane. They glared violently and darted around the room, looking at the King and Queen, the royal children and finally stared first at Burks and then Tor, where they stayed the longest.

The other person smiled gently and was perhaps the loveliest man Tor had ever seen.

The brightly clad fellow looked to be about ten years older than him, but Tor got that the short one had to be Denno Brown. His clothing was a simple tunic and loose trousers in pale blue. If Count Ward had been made twenty again, shrunk and somehow improved by about thirty percent, he'd be this man.

It was the smaller man who spoke first, his voice smooth and fluid, washing over them like a silk cover being pulled up on a bed. The warmth and friendliness was so apparent that Tor had to wonder why they were having a war with these people at all. They could have talked out any problems and if they let this man speak for them it would probably go to Austra's advantage easily.

"Your majesties, respected worthies, Green and..." The man locked eye's with Tor and then suddenly smiled happily.

"A new brother? Burks... you did it? It worked? Amazing!"

Burks nodded.

"Denno. Yes, Tor is as you see, as we are. He and I are, with but minor changes, less than one would expect from a clone even, the same being. The differences are all in the Cordes line. This is Torrance Baker. Born of my daughter Laurali. You'd recognize her too. Lara."

The gorgeous man... winced. Hard.

"Ah. Couldn't have worked with one of the other girls? White perhaps? Even Red? I suppose the genetic knowledge was important for the procedure and your own... techniques... magic?" He nodded, figuring it out for himself, without needing to be told, even though Tor struggled to follow a bit.

"Both are needed to form such perfect beings then?" He winked at Tor and smiled grandly.

"Don't let that perfect part go to your head little brother, I just mean that you're a very good replication. Well, the world could do worse than to have another green man in it. Perhaps we could meet to

discuss your future someday? That would be very nice indeed. I think the rest of us have forgotten what we originally were over time. It happens. Time that is.”

Burks laughed, but Tor didn't get the joke yet. Maybe after he'd lived as long as they had?

The other man growled softly, pushing the idea that he wasn't all that well balanced as far as Tor could tell.

“Silence! Enough foolishness. I've given my demands, now, tell me what you've decided to do and let me know if I get to push buttons tonight or if I have to spend yet another tedious evening suffering your collective existences.” This was directed at the King who looked back at him as if bored.

“Everyone, this is Glost Serge. Somehow that I don't understand, he's become the Prime Minister of Austra. The polite man next to him is his... advisor, Dennorian Brown. For lack of faster explanations he's Count Lairdgren and Master Tor's brother. Don't let the details bog you down, it's a headache, the truth though.”

“Enough I said Ricky! What have you and your bitch Queen decided to do, buckle under like good little dogs or die? I'm hoping for “die” myself, but it's up to you. Pick.” Glost grinned his teeth showing in a feral look that would have terrified Tor if he could just work out what he was supposed to be afraid of. As it was he kind of just wanted the man to shut up.

He was really annoying.

When Connie tried to speak, her own voice calm, the Austran leader interrupted her. Then again, demanding they choose immediately. It got to Tor, so he finally raised his hand like he used to in school. The mad eyes man's image stopped fuming and interrupting people and he pointed to Tor.

“At last, one polite person in your whole damned kingdom. Go ahead young man.” He sounded suddenly prim, but calm, as if actually taking a question in a school room.

“Sorry, not to show how dense I am, but I'm not really certain what's going on, could you fill me in?”

The man blinked, started around the room as everyone looked at the table except for Burks and Ali, then laughed an insane and lilting belly laugh that sounded both false and deranged.

“No one told you? Not anything? Too cowardly Ricky? Can't tell a little boy that the big bad Austran is making him leave his wife and marry my Daria? Haven't told him why he can't say no either, have you? Brilliant, oh, let me then, oh yes, this will be fun. Listen close everybody. Once upon a time...”

Glost Serge spoke well, perfect Noram even, if slightly accented at times, the effect coming and going, but he was a lousy story teller, at

least in the moment. That could be stress, or homicidal rage, messing with his timing and delivery. Tor couldn't tell which exactly yet.

"I had thirty-five nuclear devices built and pointed at all of Noram's Major cities. Then I told the King, the evil bully known as Ricky Cordes and his little bitch wife that if you didn't marry my daughter and return her to me safe and sound, I'd send the missiles flying and kill you all. An eighty kiloton bomb for each Count and Countess and two for Ricky and his brood of dullards. That's you by the way kids, I don't want you to get confused. Just in case it's too hard for you, "dullard" means someone that isn't very bright... Oh, probably bright enough from what I've heard, but your education system there is a joke. Science isn't taught at all and you actually practice magic... How quaint and superstitious. I suppose I'll have to be ready for you to chant some curses at me now, won't I? I'm really so very frightened... So now, either give over the money and the boy along with my daughter, who has best not been harmed and I'll let you live, for now at least, or refuse and take your due. Pick."

It took Tor a moment to process the whole thing, looking at Burks, hoping the old man would get his personal shorthand.

"Bomb... big? Can we defeat them? Shield or weapons?" Tor tilted his head as Burks shrugged.

"Weapons yes, the one you made. For the rest, big and spread poison. Land killers. Cities gone and the rest poisoned. Probably can't shield, too big."

"Oh."

So they could fight on fair ground, but couldn't stop the madman by just blocking him. It would take a real fight and probably destroy both lands. Tor looked at the crazy man and wondered if he was nearly as gone as he seemed or if it was all an act for some reason.

The whole thing was a bit out there as far as complicated and unpleasant plots, but he got why the man wanted him to marry his daughter and go there, because then his work wouldn't be of use here. He could be killed at leisure or maybe exploited. Glost didn't seem to have a high regard for magic though, so maybe it wouldn't be that one. Just killed then? Probably.

Tor was nearly willing. Sacrificing his own life to stop the murder of millions was a good trade. No one could doubt that. Even evil people would have done it. It was just too obvious to go against. What caused him to balk was when Daria Serge was brought in. Wearing irons.

Lillith Degray.

It made a convoluted and sneaky kind of sense once he heard it. Smythe had investigated further and found that she didn't have a history, not in Noram. She wouldn't answer questions, so they didn't

get the whole story from her, but the old counselor did put together that she'd come several years before simply to try and corrupt one of the royal children. Daria looked up and smiled at Karina when this was said, her shirt dirty, smeared with filth and covered with food stains, hair wild and one tooth missing in front. The wound was fresh and still bled freely. She'd fought when they came for her it seemed. That or someone knew she was about to get off for free and wanted a little payment first.

"Don't worry Kari, I won't tell everyone how I made you, their darling little Princess lick my asshole every night for a month." She grinned viciously.

"Oops, too late. Sorry about that."

The scary part was that she suddenly really did sound sorry. It was freaky, she'd gone from snarky and bitchy to sweet and compassionate, even contrite, sounding in the same breath.

Yep, that was sane. Good wife material too no doubt, Tor thought, wondering if he could take these devices out at a distance somehow. If they were in Austras the easiest way would be to locate them and destroy them totally. Could he make a device that would search out something like that? He needed to know a lot more about them first. Hopefully Burks knew something that could help. It had worked with the tiny devices, the nanos. Maybe it was something like that?

Karina smiled at her.

"Who cares? Trust me, that you're a murdering bitch is a much bigger deal than me doing what you wanted in bed. It's your kink anyway, not mine. By the rules here I was just being a good friend. If I'd asked my parents first, they would have told me to do it just so you could have more fun. And that's with both of them never actually liking you."

Connie gave a single short nod, but didn't let anything else show on her face.

It made Tor wince a bit. People did that? Eewww. He didn't want to judge, but... Eewww!

Lilli drooped a little. Sad her barb hadn't hit home? What did she expect from a noble of Noram? Tor shrugged himself, thinking that the girl was confused and deranged, so maybe she wasn't really thinking anything, just responding to what was put in front of her. She hadn't even tried to speak to her father yet. She raised a chained hand to wave a little, but then kept her mouth shut.

Tor sat back and listened, because, obviously the words of someone like him meant very little to the Austras, though Denno seemed all right. Really it didn't make sense for him to be backing Serge like he was. That seemed to cross Burks mind too, and he stared

at the illusion of his brother, their brother? Which looked serene and relaxed.

“Den, a bit against the treaty isn't it? Nuke's? Forbidden technology in fact. Also terrorism isn't allowed between us. We haven't even been invited to the parley table in this. Do you have an explanation that might shed some light?” The tone was interested and polite, not demanding. Then you didn't need to be demanding with someone that actually wanted to tell you something did you?

The Austran Ancient spread his hands eyes going heavy lidded in a way that meant something that Tor couldn't understand. He got it was a code, but lacked the key. Something very old then? Burks responded in nearly the same fashion a beat later. Oh. That was the signal to start then? Tor focused on what they did and said as closely as he could.

“Well, I've been a little out of the loop for a while, about seven years. Hard to tell down here. I agree that I've personally been remiss in this, Thirty-five nuclear devices?” He rubbed his nose with the side of one index finger a cute move, but not one that fit his stature. Something about the devices?

“Really Burks, you should bring the kids here when they marry, nothing would please me more than to see what our new little brother brings to the game.” Long hair brushed back, a feminine gesture, out of keeping with even a few moments before, on the word nothing. Tor thought he was starting to get it, it was about the devices, the claim of thirty-five was nothing? Did that mean there were a lot more hidden away or none at all?

Burks nodded his face still serious.

“We haven't established that Tor is marrying Daria yet. Even if we agree to the terms, we need a time, a place and assurances that Tor will be safe in Austr. Naturally this all depends on him. We can't ask him to give up his life just to amuse Glost, can we? Hardly seems like something he'd do.”

Tor almost missed the meaning there all together, it came so fast, Burks thrumming his fingers on the dark cherry wood table, in time with the words, going just a tiny bit faster on the key points. It worked out to something like “Time, place, Tor. Naturally this all depends on him. Ask him. Seems like something he'd do.”

Right. Some kind of stupid rescue mission?

That did seem like something he'd do, didn't it? Suppressing a nod Tor dug his heels in then. After all, if it seemed easy no one would believe it.

“No way. I love Ali, she's my wife. Any kind of annulment would just be a sham. Lillith, Daria here, killed Yardley. I only met her once, but really... you can't make me marry her! Even the King can't order

that.” Well he could order it, but Tor didn't really have to do it. Not by tradition. Of course that wasn't the real message he just passed.

What he tried to communicate, attempting to be subtle about it was “I sham, make me marry her. King order.” It needed a question mark at the end, but he had to hope that one of these two would get the idea. Really, it would have to be Burks, since the fellow off in a foreign land in a prison cell couldn't order anyone to do much of anything. Then rubbing his own nose he finished the message.

“I'll fight you on it if you try!”

Then he did. They did a decent job of it too. Glost Serge stood back and laughed at them as they all cried, pleaded and screamed at him to save them, he played the insane spoiled brat with too much power, a thing he'd done before, for real, but didn't threaten to destroy Austras if Serge didn't back off. It would be one thing if the man had the weapons, but the longer they went on the more his crazy eyes shone with triumph above the glittering buttons and too loud coat below. Everyone argued against him except Ali, who resolutely held his hand in support and said nothing, which was perfect. Her face twisted a little so he squeezed her hand, the white, slightly iridescent dress she wore looked like foam around her shoulders to him suddenly and he had a strong urge to kiss her, but it didn't fit the scene. Instead he told Burks Lairdgren, his own grandfather, to go fuck himself. Everyone went quiet then, even the Austrasians.

“That is it young man! I'm both your grandfather and your Count. You may not have to marry on the King's command but you do on mine! The issue is settled, your marriage is annulled and you'll wed Daria Serge in three months, in their capital city. That's my final word on it!” His posture turned aggressive like he wanted to fight, squared off and stiff, fists clenched tight, knuckles going white.

It didn't really worry Tor, because he'd seen the man fight once. It was a relaxed and fluid thing even in a battle to the death. If he came at him to pat him on the back it would have been scarier. Tor crossed his arms and stood up, just as aggressive, but more passive. After all, you couldn't fight like that, not well.

“Oh?” Tor didn't raise his voice now, instead he let himself seem very, very angry and barley in control.

“What are you going to do if I don't? Kill me? That won't help your little plan at all will it? Daria do you take this corps to be your husband for all eternity? She'd probably like that though, no back talk!” He laughed hollowly, and looked to Rolph as if for support. It couldn't come, his friend still thought their kingdom faced destruction if Tor didn't go along with all this.

“Come on, he only wants to get me down there so he can kill me, or at very best lock me up and forget about me!” That, Tor guessed

was the real plan, that and getting his daughter back alive.

Burks told him to shut up, the King suggested that Knight should put the kingdom before himself and Connie wept openly. Rolph got more and more grim the whole time and Varley clutched her arms across her middle as if it hurt physically. Karina kept staring at Lilli and Tor was pretty sure that if she could figure out a way to do it, the girl was going to die before Tor was taken. Possibly before she left the room.

Ali stayed very still, as if trying not to be noticed and so did her mom. A conditioned response to potential violence most likely. If Karen had been that conditioned for sex, what else had that freak of a father been doing to them?

Slowly, over the course of an hour the plan was set. Finally he sat, breathing hard, defeated and probably doomed. When they walked Daria out she smiled, turned to him and spoke loudly enough for the room to hear.

“When I have you back home I'm going to have you castrated and sell your ass on the street to all comers for our wedding night. If you don't bleed out the first time, I'll let you alternate between doing that and sucking cock from then on. We can use your magic clothes to dress you in pretty lacy under things and put you in those fancy whore boots they like here. Doesn't that sound fun? Maybe I won't even sell you, I'll just let people take turns. Yes, that sounds much more like you doesn't it? Just giving your ass away?”

She said it in her serious, crazy voice, not teasing, not threatening, a plan to be followed pure and simple. Tor stared at her. There was nothing to say to that. Crazy just didn't play by the same rules as sane. Most of the time it barley played by rules at all. He shook slightly instead. For once in his life he was actually faking it. The girl didn't scare him at all.

The room was cleared of everyone but the participants in the little talk and Burks carefully packed up the communications device, a science thing that Tor wasn't supposed to understand, but could take some hints from anyway. It was doable by magic too, though talking at a distance was really enough, why did he need to see people all the time? It took too much space for one thing and for him to do it would waste work if not energy.

Once they were alone, and they actually were for once, no spies watched from the walls as far as Tor could tell, Burks grinned at him.

“Not bad. Little sloppy at first, but you picked up the idea soon enough. So did you get the whole thing?” Everyone else stared at the Count but Tor nodded.

“ I think. There are no nuclear weapons, he tried to build some but people in his own system sabotaged them. He's insane, but still has

a firm grip on Austra somehow. Denno Brown is being held captive and has been for somewhere between seven and ten years, he isn't sure, what he does know is that he's being kept in the basement of Serges palace." Tor frowned and looked at the Ancient hard. The man had regressed in age and now looked virtually like Tor did, but a little too tall and wearing green instead of black. The hair was too short, but they had three months to make it match.

"That was a little vague. It would be best if we could narrow that down. Um, then we set the time, three months from now. Now all I have to do is figure out how to go in, free him and get out without the Austrans catching us. I guess, when I start working again that's what I'm doing, figuring out how to get us out."

Everyone else stared at him now. Rolph was the one that spoke.

"Huh? Um, Tor, the plan is for you to go get married isn't it? And then apparently be turned into a girl and made a whore? Well, not really, they get paid. I'm not sure I know where the rest came from there..."

Burks sat and smiled, their looks matching so closely that first Ali gasped and pointed and then everyone else gasped too, except the King who just nodded.

"I see, so this isn't a marriage at all, it's a rescue mission?"

The Count looked around and nodded, his mind clearly elsewhere.

"Right, Tor and I go and get our brother. That's not too hard to understand, is it?"

Copying what she'd seen Tor do with the obviously insane man earlier, and most likely not to certain everyone hadn't caught the crazy bug, Ali raised her hand. Burks nodded to her gently.

"Yes dear?"

"Um, if the marriage to Lilli isn't real, then are Tor and I still married or not?" She sounded half scared as if the answer depended on her asking the right way.

Burks shrugged.

"Oh, you're still married. You'll stay that way too, Tor can even help get you set up at school and get back to classes. I think the Prince can too, resume school, for now at least. Even Serge won't want to mess things up now. Sorry about all the dramatics, but it would have looked a little strange if Tor got on one knee and begged Daria for her hand, given everything."

Everyone was happier then, if wrung out by the events of the last hours. Karina ran over and hugged Ali and him, Tor didn't let go of his wife's hand. He'd managed, somehow, to not lose her yet. He really didn't want her to somehow wonder off. Rolph came and gave them both hugs too, but the rest of the royal family stayed back as if wary

or not wanting to intrude. But they were all friends, weren't they?

Why were they acting so... the word that came to mind was guilty, but that couldn't have been right. Tor walked over, nudging everyone else with him, until they stood in front of Varley. When it came to getting information, she was a good place to start.

"What?" He asked, waving his hands gently at the three of them who mainly weren't looking at him.

She got it. Of course she did, she was brilliant after all.

"Tor... we were all willing to trade your life to a madman just to buy time to save our people, the kingdom. Aren't you mad at us? We just sold you to them. I heard what that... thing said! They plan to torture you if not kill you outright. Probably both. I don't think you should go. The Brown man is responsible for Austra and didn't do his job, now they have a monster for a leader. Why should you help him? You don't know him and he isn't really your brother. He was born thousands of years ago!"

She had a point. Still, what else could they have done? If there really were bombs pointed at them like that, he would have had to go anyway. True, then he'd have outfitted as many fighters as possible with the best weapons he could come up with first and destroyed the bombs and their delivery devices, but they would have had to say roughly the same things. Tor knew that.

"Well, you know, later, when I'm trading you lot to the monsters to buy the rest of us time I just expect you all to not get pissy about it, that's all. Plus it worked out well enough this time." He put his arm over her shoulder, reaching up to do that now, unlike when they'd met and been about the same size, oh those precious weeks. She might be showing he decided, trying not to stare. It was hard to tell with her being clothed and all, this early on.

He really considered asking her to take it off sometime soon, just to look, but realized that his wife was hovering at his elbow. Married, he reminded himself with a happy lift to his spirit at the thought. With all that entailed. Most of it at least. They still hadn't talked about children. That would be a delicate and possibly painful subject. Well, soon he'd do it, but not today. Not that soon. They both deserved a real rest. Not that he was going to get one.

"Burks... we need to get together and actually make a plan. My house tomorrow morning?" It was secure and more, it was home, for now at least.

Burks nodded.

"Indeed."

Tor nodded back. It looked to him like it was finally approaching time to finally deal with Austra. There was just so much to do. He needed to set up with Ali at school, try to get back into classes himself

and then save Denno Brown from his own people.

For a second he felt amazed that he'd gotten himself into all of this. But thinking about it, he realized something.

He hadn't.

At almost every turn, the situation seemed to have been set in motion by an Ancient.

Tor decided that was going to need some thought as well, if he ever had the time.

Then, really, he did.

Possibly all the time in the world.